

“When Life Calls Us Back”

By Reverend Jane Smith, Channing Memorial Church, Ellicott City, MD Feb. 2, 2020

“No person ever steps in the same river twice, for it is not the same river and they are not the same person”

The words of Greek philosopher Heraclitus. Rivers flow, starting as snow at the peak of a mountain, fed by rain, constantly moving towards the ocean, mingling with the creatures of the water, smoothing stone, providing life to plant an animal alike, carrying twigs and leaves and minnows, and through all of these changes, never the same river, constantly moving, shaping, shifting.

And this same way this person, never the same between each trip to the water. For just as gravity changes the flow of a river, so does life change the makeup of the human. Sorrows, joys, death, birth, deep grief and momentous love, trauma and successes; between each trip to the river, different, permanently affected, never to be the same again. Constantly moving, shaping, shifting.

And it is this sorrow, this death, this grief, trauma – these changes that have the potential to destroy and yet these changes that we can survive; things that happen that can change us forever and perhaps leave us in a world not as good as the one we were in before, but by intentionally living, intentionally incorporating this new reality into our life, we can notice and respond when life calls us back, and we can reply with resilience. Attorney Elizabeth Edwards spoke the words, “Resilience is accepting your new reality, even if it’s less good than the one you had before.” Even when we miss our old reality, we can heal, be happy, and be agents of

good. Now this word resilient- this word sounds intense and thus may seem unattainable. And yet this resilience, the idea of intention, of intentionally deciding to heal and taking the steps needed to do so, can begin with an act of profound acceptance, as Edwards understood it to be, of simply accepting a new reality, or even an act of waiting. Waiting, for “this, too, shall pass.”

We heard earlier the words of poet Jane Hirshfield,

More and more I have come to admire resilience.

Not the simple resistance of a pillow, whose foam returns over and over to the same shape, but the sinuous tenacity of a tree: finding the light newly blocked on one side, it turns in another.

Life will inevitably change; hardships are inherent to living. Resilience, this sinuous tenacity, is when we are intentional about this change. Resilience is not a pillow that continuously returns to its standard shape each time it is crushed, bent, squashed or thrown. Resilience, intention, is a tree. When the leaves of a tree are overwhelmed with darkness, they move, again, towards the light. Towards this life sustaining light, essential to photosynthesis and survival. And with this intentional movement this tree is forever changed, branches growing in new directions as they continuously work towards survival. Our resilience echoes this change that is inherent to nature: we are called to reach out in new directions and shape and change in order to respond when our light goes out, and life calls us back. Resilience implies intention; living life and surviving life and enjoying life by intentionally reacting to these inevitable changes, intentionally healing. Each person’s light is unique, that thing that calls us back, perhaps family

or a faith community or a career or laughter or humor or kindness. Reach towards that light, aided through what feeds your soul - a practice of meditation or prayer or exercise or cooking or reading; something that connects you to your core. Sometimes therapy, support groups, or intentional communities are needed. This is hard work, and this is rewarding work. This takes time. When done this can lead to compassion, to survival and strength, even if our new life is incomparable to what we lived before. Not a pillow, but a tree.

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We heard the words of Eric Greiten, who wrote that resilience is not a bouncing back to the person we used to be, but an intention to integrate our difficult experiences into our lives. This integration is crucial! Not to integrate, not to intentionally change and move forward with this new life, is to live a life of denial, a life that can slip into a depression. Incorporating these experiences into our lives- this leads to unique understandings, leads to kindness, leads to compassion, leads to strength.

Folks who encounter pain, loss – integrating this may lead to spiritual exploration, religious questions, a search for answers. Some folks who do this find a new inner spirituality deeper and more meaningful than before. Some folks, recovering from pain, find this strength to know that whatever happens in the future, they will be ok. To integrate this loss and know that, in future losses, this new inner strength, this integration of pain, this will get them through. Integration can look like a profound understanding of joy! For with the knowledge of true pain can come the knowledge of true happiness; the ability to savor the good times because of an inner

knowledge of the bad; to savor the good times because of the knowledge that another hardship is yet to come. This can be intense, difficult, time consuming work, and yet so powerful and rewarding.

And with this integration, we are presented with an opportunity to spread this strength and resilience out into the world:

The bereaved that lost a sister to suicide and became active in the National Alliance for Mental Illness.

The church who lost a member to addiction and began to host Alcoholic Anonymous meetings.

The surviving partner who used their experience with loss to start a support group.

What about the suffering person who is simply, and yet profoundly, kind? Who integrates hardships by offering a shoulder to someone experiencing similar pain? Who can authentically smile and care about each person they meet, because they know the pain of not being able to smile?

Naomi Shihab Nye writes of her own understanding of kindness,

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.

That event, that situation, that loss or dissolving future – responding with intention, incorporating these events that forever change us, often these people understand compassion in a unique and startling way. Not to bounce back because that is improbable. But intentionally integrating; that is healing.

As a child my parents divorced. Before the divorce it had been the four of us: mom, dad, my sister Annie and me all living together in a house in Pennsylvania. But life changed. After the divorce, Annie and I lived with a single mom who frequently had to move, visiting our dad on the weekends. An event that led to an entirely new reality. And I remember my dad driving away that first time, and I remember how sad that little girl felt. And she felt sad for quite some time. But I remember life calling me back. To me, life called me back when I realized I was missing fun. I was intentional about coming back from this pain and being extremely intentional about incorporating joy into my life. I remember baking cookies and cake every weekend with my father, eating raw dough and coming home relatively sick every Sunday night to my mother, a mother who took time to teach us woodworking and read us stories. My sister and I were different, our branches grew in different ways than they would have if our parents had not divorced, but we found that nourishing light calling us back, this light to me was a desire to play. And just like the poet Nye suggested, we grew compassionate and

understanding, kindness made sense, and integrated this loss into a new life where we were stronger because of it.

Our new realities may not be as good as the reality we had before. My sister and I never lived with both of our parents again. Divorce creates a loss. Death leaves a void. War induces trauma. But life calls us back, and with so much support and with time and with hard work and with the compassion of countless others and with a personal desire to heal and with a growing sense of compassion, we can listen. Life is a gift, if only we treat it as such.

And within this gift of life, there is nothing more universal than death. And perhaps no other experience tied so closely and intimately to resilience, to living intentionally, accepting, waiting, healing, integrating. This intention to accept a new reality, and the need to wait for this reality to just not hurt so much.

Grief is a reflection of our love, and yet grief can bring about a myriad of mixed emotions. Grief can be overwhelming. And grief is different for each and every one of us. There is no right way to grieve, and this makes grieving so very complex. Some believe grief follows five stages – denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance – and others dispute this. Grief can lead to a wide array of emotions, reactions, feelings. That person never really leaves us. Resilience in grieving may mean simply having that courage to wait out the pain, searching for that light to navigate towards.

Hardship is inevitable. Pain is an inescapable part of living. And yet so is this opportunity to be intentional, and in being intentional, resilient. Working hard and taking the time to do this work. Life will never return to what we had before, for the same person never steps into the

same river twice. And although it will never be the same twice, it can still be good, it can still be fulfilling, it can still be worthwhile, it can still be radiant.

And while we all experience pain, we all have different reactions: different reactions to a death, to trauma, to a divorce, to the loss of a pet, to the loss of a career. And it comes back to this idea of intention.

Each one of us can experience the same situation, and each one of us can have a different reaction. In our Time for All Ages today, we heard three different objects respond in three different ways to the same adverse situation. Each object – an egg, a potato, and coffee beans – experienced boiling water – experienced the same adversity. And yet each responded differently. The egg was soft and became hard and rigid, the strong potato weakened, and yet the coffee was able to change its surroundings into something nourishing, something better. This parable asks of us to be intentional in our response to this boiling water – this hardship. Not to allow it to harden our souls or weaken our spirits but to change ourselves and our surroundings to that which can flourish. Intentional healing; kindness.

We can help be that light for others. We can notice when someone is slipping away, when that darkness becomes all encompassing, when we notice a loved one facing a difficult situation. This calls for us to be there and love each other and support each other. To help each other twist and bend and intentionally heal – we don't have to do this alone!

We each feel this pain. And each time we enter this room we are in a new river. Each time we enter, we are changed. And yet what is consistent is this community and each other.

Resilience is a spiritual practice, and our intentionality in joining together each week to pray, to

sing, and honor and lift up joys and sorrow, to worship, this is sacred intentionality, intentionality that can help each one of us live a life of compassion, a life of kindness, a life of inner strength. We will never be the same again; we are forever changed. And. We can heal.

Let us carry the spiritual practices that sustain us, that keep us living with intention each and every day, whether that intention is to courageously wait for the pain to dissipate, or the intention is to learn how to care for someone experiencing similar pain. Let us reach our hands to the sky and find that sunlight, just like an ancient tree. For here we are, surviving, thriving, together. Whatever brought you here today – that intention – carry it with you back out into the world. Sing those hymns, sit in quiet meditation, pray out in nature.

Let us be that tree, that mighty oak, trunk thick, branches laden with leaves reaching to the sunlight; reaching for the light. Constantly reaching for the light.

May it be so, and amen.