

“In Between” Rev. Mary Gear

Olympia UU Congregation March 29, 2020

The other morning, I woke with an image in my head, perhaps carried into the morning light on my nighttime dreams. The image was of a snow globe. You know, the ones we often see at holiday time with winter scenes in them? Snowmen and glittery snowflakes? Only this globe wasn't a calm and serene scene. It was like this (shake snow globe). Kind of like our global community right now – all shook up.

Like many of you, I am remembering times when I've felt all shook up, and, apparently, I'm working that out in my dreams. While I have never experienced a pandemic in my lifetime, I have had times of uncertainty and worry along with a sense of release and even freedom. When I came to visit OUUC last April, I told the story of my path to ministry, which includes a long time of uncertainty. I left my position with the State of Oregon, burned out and grieving, in need of rest and not sure that I would continue in my chosen profession of social work. I had no idea what would come next. I spent three years in renewal and exploration, learning to be with uncertainty, learning surrender, and learning patience.

There are many ways to describe that time when things aren't as settled as they were and haven't yet settled into what they will be; when the glittering snow is all shook up. I like the term “liminal space.” It comes from the Latin word “limen” meaning ‘a

threshold.’ It is the space between what was and what is next, a place of waiting and not knowing, a place of transition. Sound familiar?

Anthropologists use the term “liminal space” to describe the ambiguity or disorientation that occurs in the middle stage of rites of passage, when participants are no longer who they were, but have not yet transformed into who they will be.

In many cultures, including ours, we mark a change with rites of passage that help with the internal transitions: child dedications, rites of passage from childhood to adulthood, weddings, funerals or memorials. Even the Joys and Sorrows ritual that we share each Sunday is a way to mark changes and help with the internal process of transition.

During a ritual's liminal stage, participants stand at the threshold between their previous way and a new way, which the ritual establishes. They are in between, moving from this to that on the journey of life.

Organizational consultant William Bridges makes a distinction between change and transition. He defines change as situational. It's those external events that make things different than they've been. Those events that bring something new, welcome or not – a birth, a death, a marriage, a divorce, a job change, retirement. A pandemic.

Transition, on the other hand, is psychological. It's an internal process that includes reorientation to the world and redefinition of ourselves and our role in the world.

Bridges tells us that, the irony of change and transition is that very little that we do to prepare for a change actually prepares us for the transition. We can make arrangements for a change, like an expectant parent prepares for the arrival of a new baby; they get the basic stuff like a car seat and diapers, and they make space in their environment. Yet none of these things prepares them for the internal shift from being a person without responsibility for a child to being a parent. That transition requires a whole different process.

Bridges teaches that every transition has three phases: a beginning, a middle and an end, but not quite in that order. Actually the beginning of every transition is an ending, a goodbye. Once there is a change, the first thing that happens in transition is goodbye; disengagement from what was, dis-identification with how we used to be, and disorientation; things are not as they were. With every transition is a sense of loss, even when change is welcome.

In our world right now, all of the changes we're experiencing have been caused by a microscopic virus outside of our control, not a welcome change or one that most of us expected. We have said goodbye to familiar routines, to work as we know it, to volunteer commitments that give a sense of purpose. Some of us have lost jobs and income. We've said goodbye to predictability and maybe a sense of security. Some of us have lost loved ones. The world is not as it was just a few short weeks ago.

The second phase of a transition is what Bridges calls the neutral zone. This is the in between, where there is emptiness and

uncertainty. Things are not as they were and not yet as they will be. I would name this liminal space, or sacred space.

This phase requires us to surrender to the unknown, to step into the mystery not knowing where it will lead us. Like the ancient story of Jesus who wandered in the desert for 40 days and nights, the neutral zone is wandering in the wilderness. In this phase, we feel vulnerable, lost, empty. We can experience freedom and creativity. We are asked to be open and flexible.

It feels like this. (shake snow globe). All shook up. That's where we are now. On a threshold, in between what was and what will be, wandering in the wilderness. We are in liminal, sacred, space.

Transitions can be hard for many reasons, not the least of which is that they require us to be psychologically vulnerable. I'm not talking about physical vulnerability that we have been hearing about that makes people more susceptible to illness. I'm talking about open minds, open hearts and open spirits. Even while psychological vulnerability is a source of creativity and joy, it is also the source of fear. Transition requires that we step into the place of grieving a loss, being uncertain and not knowing, not being in control. Being vulnerable requires that we step into the mystery, that we embrace the unknown, and that we risk opening ourselves emotionally. Being in between, in transition, requires courage and resilience.

So, we need to build resilience, always and especially now. One of my go-to people is Rick Hanson of the Wellspring Institute for Neuroscience and Contemplative Wisdom. (Don't worry, I'll put a link in the text of this sermon online.) Hansen writes a blog called

“The Wise Brain Bulletin” offering information and spiritual practices to stay grounded. Hanson suggests three ways to resist fear and stay positive in these challenging times.

The first is appropriate action. Take a walk, cook food from scratch, create something from what you have in the junk drawer in your kitchen, sort those photos in your closet. Make a snow globe out of a mason jar! Action binds anxiety. That means that the best way to combat worry and fear is to do something, preferably something constructive. Anything is infinitely better than doing nothing.

The second resilience strategy is to “tend and befriend.” Remember that other people are stressed and scared right now, too. Offer grace and understanding. Reach out to friends and family. Right now, many of us are connecting with people we love and people we haven't talked to in years, mending strained relationships, tending old relationships and making new ones.

The third strategy for building resilience is to find ways to calm and center ourselves. Spiritual practice that allows us to feel what we are feeling now, grief, worry, excitement, creativity. All of the feelings. And, practices that help us remember that we are part of something bigger than ourselves. This is a time for more spiritual practice, not less.

In William Bridges' model of transition, after the ending and the neutral zone, the third and last phase is the new beginning.

When I entered my period of liminal space, I never could have imagined that I was beginning a path to ministry. Or rather,

beginning the awareness that my journey so far had been a path to ministry all along. I didn't know that it would take three years to move through the transition, and sometimes feared that I would never find my way. I didn't like the uncertainty and often resisted the learning.

In this time of transition as a nation and a world, we're not sure exactly when, or exactly what a new beginning will look like; that's the nature of transition. It is possible that the adaptations we are making now will help us be better as individuals and as a society. It is possible that this time will strengthen the connections between us, all of us. It is possible that we will once again experience the unity of common purpose toward the common good. Part of our work in transition is to hold hope that we will reach a new beginning, and to hold a vision that it will be infused with health, safety and justice for all. And, what is clear more now than ever is that we are in this together, waiting together, holding each other, holding hope together.

The image of the shaken snow globe is one image of this time in between the old and the new. There is another image of in between that is held in our 7th Unitarian Universalist principle: the interdependent web, the web of life that we create by our presence together, the infinite web of life that I speak of when I offer a prayer. The strands in the web that connect us, the "bonds that bind each to all." Those threads are delicate and strong. They can be stressed or challenged or pulled taut, but they are never broken. And, it is across those threads that we feel the vibration of the whisper that says: You are not alone. I am here. So, in those

moments when I feel all shook up, I remember the other image, the web of life that holds us all, now and always.

May we rest in the knowing and the not knowing, for they are part of the same.

May we rest in knowing that the web of life holds us all and we are not alone.

May we hold hope for a future grounded in love, and the peace that comes from justice.

May this be so. Blessed Be. Amen.

In the spirit of resilience and the practice of grounding ourselves, I invite you into a time of meditation. I will offer spoken meditation then we will hold silence together. We'll begin the Buddhist Loving-kindness or Metta meditation by blessing ourselves, then move out to bless all beings in the interdependent web.

I invite you to settle in, wherever you are.

Relax your body; your neck and shoulders; your arms and hands; your legs and feet.

Feel the grounding of the Earth beneath you.

Soften your focus or close your eyes if you are comfortable.

Notice your breath. Breathe in. Breathe out.

I invite you to place your hand on your heart or chest or belly.
Please repeat after me:

May I be happy.

May I be well.

May I be safe.

May I be peaceful and at ease.

May I be whole.

I invite you to extend your heart and mind out to others in your circle of friends and family, neighbors, co-workers. Please repeat after me:

May you be happy.

May you be well.

May you be safe.

May you be peaceful and at ease.

May you be whole.

I invite you to extend your heart and mind out to all beings, all that is. Please repeat after me:

May all beings be happy.

May all beings be well.

May all beings be safe.

May all be beings peaceful and at ease.

May all beings be whole.

May this be so.

Let us hold a moment of silence together.

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Elvis sings "All Shook Up"

"Saying No, Saying Yes" sermon of April 2019 (scroll to the bottom)

Wellspring Institute for Neuroscience and Contemplative Wisdom

More on the Metta Meditation