

## **“We’ve Been Changed”**

**Rev. Mary Gear**

**Delivered Sunday, March 21, 2021**

**Today’s first reading is “Surface Tension,” By Tess Baumberger:**

Of course there are people behaving badly  
during this pandemic, using it as an excuse  
to practice prejudice, to hoard, to blame;  
using it to divide and weaken us,  
cashing in on surface tensions  
for their own terrible benefit.

The news daily shows these heavy things.

In nature surface tension gathers  
water molecules together so tightly  
that they form a sort of membrane  
across which light things can dance—  
Leaves, insects, the wavering sun.  
It is why rain falls in discrete drops  
and babies can blow bubbles.  
Surface tension makes life possible.

It helps drops collect along  
subtle edges of pine needles or leaves,  
run down to water roots, then helps sap  
rise to nurture those same  
gatherers of sun and water.  
Bitter tannins in chartreuse mosses  
increase the tension so larger drops can form,  
held aloft by their fragile villi  
until they can be absorbed,

or used to foster new life.\*

Here's the other picture revealed by this pandemic.

People are reaching out in kindness and concern  
to acquaintances, neighbors, strangers  
creating aquifers, revealing watersheds running  
through the tiny capillaries of human hearts,  
minds, homes, streets and neighborhoods.

Could the bitter tannins cause such large drops  
to form that we can scarcely hold them up  
until they can be absorbed?  
Until we can use them to foster life?

Let us open ourselves wide to gather them  
So we may send them to the suffering, the grieving,  
the caregivers, and all the workers who always were essential.

Let us send them across all those spurious divisions  
because there is a deeper, humbler, more beautiful truth.

We deeply need one another, especially now.  
We can pull together across distances to form a surface  
Across which light things can dance and which can nurture life.

**Our second reading is “Shaped by our dedication to the values that shape us... “  
by Rev. Karen G Johnston**

We will get through,  
not unscathed, to be sure ~  
too much has been already lost,

too many beloveds have been lost.

So, not unscathed,  
but a new kind of whole.  
The kind that only emerges  
from the going through it,  
from the wrestling with it,  
from the demanding something  
in exchange for what we lose,  
making clear what we claim,  
making clear what we demand, in return,  
is not personal gain or revenge but  
~ a blessing ~  
shaped by our loves and our losses,  
our sorrows and our joys,  
our failures and our triumphs.

a blessing  
shaped by our bodies and minds,  
by our singing and dancing,  
by our praying and listening,  
by the beauty we persist in co-creating,  
the justice we insist upon.

a blessing  
shaped by our dedication  
to the values that shape us:  
unremitting compassion;  
a joyful and radical inclusion;  
a preferential option for the poor and marginalized;  
a deep and wide dismantling of white supremacy;

honoring the great Mystery of life  
with appreciation and humility;  
and with a commitment  
to collective liberation that frees all.

A blessing for all.

### **Sermon/homily**

The global pandemic has affected everything, and the arts and artists have suffered greatly during this time. While the pandemic has unleashed creativity and adaptations that we would never have imagined, many of us grieve how we used to experience the arts. Perhaps none of the arts has been mourned more than the ability to make music together. Many of us have marveled at the amazing compilations of musicians in their individual Zoom boxes put together by skilled technicians. We were even more amazed when we learned that it takes hundreds of hours to create just one short piece of music that way. Still. Our yearning to make music together is as ancient as humanity itself.

Over this past year, choirs have been especially challenged and OUUC's choir is no different. Troy and choir members have done a great job of connecting by Zoom despite those challenges. The choir went online shortly after things shut down last Spring and have continued since. They've learned new music and Troy says many have improved their singing in unexpected ways. Troy has shared this journey with me as he learned new technology, as choir members learned new technology and the community stayed together, mostly.

Over the past few weeks, some choir members have started gathering with Troy to sing together in the Commons. Troy has created a hybrid choir rehearsal on Wednesday evenings where most members are online and a few are in the Commons. Rest assured, they are abiding by all of the health and safety measures outlined in the guidance for choirs and singing: 5-layer singers masks, at least 9 feet of distance,

screening and signing in for contact tracing if needed. There are two short rehearsals with 30 minutes in-between for cleaning and airing out the space.

Even more remarkable than all of the logistics are the reactions that Troy has shared with me. One relatively new member entered the OUUC building for the first time ever to attend a choir rehearsal in person a few weeks ago. They met Troy and other singers in person for the first time. Troy described to me the emotional release that came with seeing others in person and making music together: the foggiest that finally clears, a flood of emotions, and some tears.

Some of you have described this same release when you received your vaccination: a wave of emotions that includes sadness, joy and profound relief.

We have all been in a state of individual and collective stress for more a year. It is no surprise that we are experiencing strong emotions and emotional release as we move through this time.

Stress is defined as an external event that we experience internally with a perception of threat and that then affects us physically, emotionally, mentally and spiritually. Stress is an event that we experience as a threat that affects all parts of our being.

Stress and trauma can be viewed as being on a continuum. We all experience stress; our dinosaur brain responds to external events before our thinking brain even kicks in. What makes an event move from stress to trauma is our experience of it; we are more likely to experience an event as traumatic if we also feel helpless, powerless, without control.

There are several kinds of trauma. There is the chronic stress and trauma that some experience in childhood, like abuse, neglect, poverty, and other adverse childhood events. There is the trauma that comes from a shocking event, like an accident or assault. Then there is the chronic trauma of relationships in everyday life, such as

discrimination and poverty. Black, Indigenous and people of color have a higher baseline level of stress and trauma because we live in a racist society with systems in place to support that racism. Chronic stress and trauma can also come from things like sleep deprivation and overworking. The stress is more likely to become trauma when we feel powerless to affect it.

There is individual trauma, things that we as individuals experience. There is also collective trauma, things that we experience as a neighborhood, community, state, nation or world. Things like war, natural disasters like fires and floods, and pandemics. We are in a time of collective stress and trauma now. Most of us had little or no control over how or whether the virus spread. We may have done what we could to mitigate it, but we've had very little control over much of what has happened. We certainly couldn't control its existence.

Our shared experience of the stress and trauma of the pandemic over this past year has affected us differently. For those of us who have experienced trauma in other ways, childhood trauma, traumatic one-time events, or chronic oppression, the stress of this time may be even more pronounced and traumatic because our internal and external resources are already maxed out. As I have said before, we are all in the same storm, but we are not in the same boat. We're not in the same boat when it comes to stress and trauma either.

Chronic stress and trauma affect our memory and our thinking. How many of us this past year have complained about feeling foggy, distracted, unable to concentrate or focus, not knowing what day it is, unable to remember what we had for breakfast today, let alone yesterday? It's not just Zoom fatigue, it's stress and trauma fatigue.

Over the past 25 years a new paradigm has been developing that recognizes the impact of chronic stress and trauma on all of us. It's called Trauma Informed Care. Many professions have adopted the principles and practices of trauma informed care, from social work and psychiatry to the criminal justice and child welfare systems. I learned

about trauma informed care when I did a chaplaincy internship at the Oregon State Hospital in Salem, the place where the movie “One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest” was filmed. It was a really big building filled with stress and trauma.

The principles of trauma informed care are straightforward, asking professionals to consider the role that trauma and lingering traumatic stress play in the lives of the people they serve. We know that when we are stressed, we tend to return old ways of being and doing, things that may have helped us survive before but may not serve us well now. Often behavior that seems nonsensical and even destructive makes some sense when viewed in the context of trauma. For example, someone who seems unable to take even a small step to help themselves may be suffering from a lifetime of oppression that has taught them that it doesn’t matter what they do, the discrimination will continue. Trauma has impaired their innate ability to care for themselves.

A trauma informed approach asks professionals to consider how they might behave to avoid adding new stress. How can they better help people heal? How can policies, practices, procedures and environments be created to support those who have experienced trauma? This approach considers that culture, age, gender, and other identities make a difference, as does the setting and context. The approach seeks to create safety, transparency, trustworthiness, support, collaboration, empowerment, and choice; all the things that stress and trauma take away. I hear our UU seven principles in these principles--inherent worth and dignity, connection, finding truth and meaning.

When I served at the State Hospital, I often reflected on what it might mean to provide trauma informed ministry. Over this past year, as we’ve lived through a pandemic, I have wondered what it might be like if we lived trauma informed lives. What if we lived our lives with the principles of trauma informed care, assuming that we all have experienced stress and perhaps trauma, so need safety, transparency, trust, collaboration and empowerment? This past year it has become even more apparent that all of us bring some level of stress and trauma to our relationships, some more and some less, but now we all have one big, shared experience of stress and trauma. We don’t know what

else people have experienced in their lives; we do know that all of us have been affected in some way by the pandemic.

I believe that our most pressing theological question is this: with the realization that we are all connected, even more so now, how are we to be together?

As we begin to reconnect in person, we will have to re-learn how to be together. We'll have to learn how to communicate again. We will have to learn how to trust each other again. We have been changed and how we were together before may not serve us as we gather again. We have all experienced chronic stress and for some of us, trauma. If we were to live trauma informed lives, how would we treat ourselves? How would we treat others?

We might ask, how can we make space for and welcome the emotional release that we will feel? How can we help create safety and support for everyone? How can we empower each other, build mutuality, provide choice?

There are suggestions for how individuals can begin to control their stress and trauma, things like setting boundaries to get rest and rejuvenation, we are most resilient when we are rested. Things like slowing down to give ourselves time to process the experiences and emotions we've had, grieving for what has been lost. Keeping human connection and moving our bodies. Focusing on what we do have control over and taking action in a positive way. Noticing simple pleasures and gratitude.

As a community we can also support each other as we move into this next phase of the pandemic. We aren't done yet and it is not done with us. If we are to live among the ruins, as the reading today said, we need strength for what lies ahead. Just like Max the seagull, we can help each other find our way. We can offer grace to ourselves and to each other. We can remind each other to slow down, to process the emotions.



Based on what we have experienced, our past, we can create a new kind of whole, wholeness as individuals and wholeness as a community. It will be the wholeness that comes from struggle and wrestling with what has been and with what is. We can make meaning together. We can grieve together and we can celebrate together—we are still here. This is the work of our congregational community.

We have been changed. We need each other now more than ever. As we reopen and rebuild our relationships, I invite you to consider what values you want to bring into this new world. What practices will help you recognize how you have been affected? What will help remind you of your values and how you want to be?

Let's bring these questions into a time of silence together.