

“Hope in the Doom and Gloom”

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Centering Words

The Parable of the Choir By

A friend once shared what she called the Parable of the Choir: A choir can sing a beautiful note impossibly long because singers can individually drop out to breathe as necessary and the note goes on. Social justice activism should be like that, she said. That's stuck with me.

Reflection

Rev. Danielle Webber

Hope in the doom and gloom. That feels like a pretty laden topic. First of all, how can any one person know what brings a whole community hope. And secondly who is defining doom and gloom.

I guess all I can do is share with you all my conceptions, both of hope, and of the doom and gloom. Which is all I am ever able to do. And perhaps we can discover places where our ideas overlap, or connect, and maybe stretch into new ways of being, and discovering.

I once read portions of a book called *The Better Angels of our Nature* – by Steven Pinker. He spent over 700 pages trying to describe why he believed violence has drastically declined over the centuries, and even the millennia. His list of citations is over 100 pages long, showing that there are numerous people who have written about the horrors of violence in the past, and that there are many people who agree with his hypothesis. Pinker argues that with the enlightenment, and with the spread of democracy there has been a drastic decrease in violence, arguing that the number of people who were killed in violent conflicts was steadily dropping. Pinker argues that moral progress has led us to this place of what he calls “The Long Peace.”

I stated that I only read parts of this book, because I really struggled with the concepts that this old white man, highly educated, and Pulitzer prize finalist stated. I did not agree with his definition of violence. He explicitly stated that violence was a physical thing. He refused to include any sort of violence that did not include physical abuse. So no verbal abuse, no economic inequality, no discussion of oppressions, or political structures condemning marginalized populations. And perhaps if Pinker had chosen to broaden his definitions of violence then he would have to re-evaluate his conclusion. And maybe even recognize that the violence in the world today is higher than it has been in decades.

For me violence, in this more broadly defined way, is the doom and gloom that we are now facing. The violence that human kinds have done to the Earth. The violence that white supremacy has done to humanity. The violence that hetero-normativity – that means the normalization of heterosexual relationships – has done to humanity. The violence that cis-gender normativity – which means the normalization of people whose gender identity matches the sex that they were assigned at birth – has done to humanity. The violence of the Doctrine of Discovery - which really is just one of the precursors to white supremacy – and all of the trauma that it has created.

I feel that I could go on and on describe the many different kinds of violence we have to endure these days. Generational Trauma, alcohol, drugs, maybe capitalism?

The point is, there are so many things in our world to fight against, to fight for, to be concerned about, and to feel overwhelmed by that we could get lost in that gloom. I have on several occasions wondered how we are going to solve the challenges in the world. How are we going to come out better on the other end. How to gain control in situations, how to overcome struggles, how to find stability? There have been times when I don't want to. I would rather focus on the things that I can achieve, finding a sense of accomplishment and tackling the small stuff, just to keep my head a float. I can't keep track of all the rallies, marches, protests, and vigils that are happening in this little city – let alone manage to find the time to go to them all. Trans day of remembrance, healing circle, homelessness round table, voting and discussing political matters, A Vigil for Overdose drug awareness, Mental Health educational events and 5 km walk or run, climate awareness marches. These are all things I have done in the last 8 months. Maybe a little longer. And yet sometimes I feel as though it is not enough. Actually I often feel like it is not enough. What do we do when we feel that way?

When we have recycled everything we can, when we have divvied up the paper and plastic, the lightbulbs and the glass, the cans, and the Styrofoam. We have composted, and we have reduced our purchase of plastic, and we have bought reusable items, and we have stopped using straws and cotton swabs, and we take cloth bags to the grocery stores, and we have done everything we can think of, but the scientists are still telling us it is not enough. What happens when we go to bed at night and whisper to ourselves "Little doll, little doll, what shall we do?"

I think that is when we need to turn to the Parable of the Choir. Reminding ourselves that we are not in this alone, and that we are able to lean on the support of those around us, take a step back, have a breather and remember that we do not have to save the world, or even our own small corner of it, alone.

We can look at this from a different point of view, or through a different lens. Some One hundred fifty years ago the world was introduced to the idea of Natural Selection, and Survival of the Fittest. Previous to this idea was an evolutionary theory of essentialism – the belief that every species has essential characteristics that are unalterable AND transformism – the idea of the altering of one species into another, much like the alchemical transmutation of base metals into gold. Darwin's concept of Survival of the Fittest, offers us a look at how heritable traits change over generations. Without getting into the biology of it all, I am sure we can agree that Natural Selection is a very widely accepted concept of evolution. But it feels as though this is

not going to help us overcome the current struggles within the world. It doesn't necessarily help us to struggle to survive, when what we need is to thrive. So we turn to a different science. That of resilience:

"As the human population grows, the variety of life declines, ice caps shrink, and our earth system behaves in ways its species have never experienced, the past no longer provides us with a guide to how the future will behave. We search for solutions while moving into an increasingly uncertain space. In such a time, resilience science provides important insights to help communities engage with the complex set of challenges we need to navigate. Resilience scientists define resilience as the capacity of a system to absorb disturbance and reorganize so as to retain essentially the same function, structure and feedbacks." This quote from resilience.org helps us to understand that no longer will it be survival of the fittest, that the person or individual people who are best able to cope with the struggles, who are best able to overcome adversities, who are the best able to challenge the status quo that will come out at the top. But it is the community that has the ability to cope with shock and yet keep functioning who are going to overcome. Our collective ability to withstand the violence that is currently being perpetuated on humanity and the earth will be directly connected to our collective ability to be resilient. The parable of the choir. A choir can sing a beautiful note impossibly long because singers can individually drop out to breathe as necessary and the note goes on.

Another Allegory that could help us – Are you a Carrot, Egg or Coffee Bean?

A young woman went to her mother and told her about her life, and how things were so hard for her. She did not know how she was going to make it and wanted to give up. She was tired of fighting and struggling. It seemed as one problem was solved a new one arose.

Her mother took her to the kitchen. She filled three pots with water. In the first, she placed carrots, in the second she placed eggs, and the last she placed coffee beans.

She let them sit and boil without saying a word. In about twenty minutes she turned off the burners. She fished the carrots out and placed them in a bowl. She pulled the egg out and placed them in a bowl. Then she ladled the coffee into a bowl. Turning to her daughter, she asked, "Tell me what you see?"

"Carrots, eggs and coffee," the daughter replied.

She brought her closer and asked her to feel the carrots. She did and noted that they were soft. She then asked her to take an egg and break it. After pulling off the shell, she observed the hard-boiled egg. Finally, she asked her to sip the coffee. The daughter smiled, as she tasted the rich aroma.

Then the daughter asked, "What's the point, mom?"

Her mother explained that each of these objects had faced the same adversity _boiling water_ but each reacted differently. The carrot went in strong, hard, and unrelenting. However, after being subjected to the boiling water, it softened and became weak. The egg had been fragile. Its thin outer shell had protected its liquid interior. But after being through the boiling water, its insides became hardened. The ground coffee beans were unique, however. After they were in the boiling water they had changed the water.

"Which are you?" She asked her daughter. When adversity knocks on your door, how do you respond? Are you a carrot, an egg, or a coffee bean?

I know that the “moral of the story” is to say – be the coffee bean!! When adversity comes knocking, kick it in the butt, make it change, and turn things around.

But the reality is that we can’t always do that. And I don’t think we should do that. Boiled soft carrots, and hard boiled eggs can be just as delicious and necessary to life as coffee. Taking time to allow ourselves to be delicate, soft and malleable can be necessary. It is important to grieve when life becomes overwhelming.

And there is a time to get fierce, and persistent, to combat the struggles with a hardened heart, as well. We need all voices in this choir. Those who can find the shift needed to make it through adversity while changing their surroundings, and those who are effected by their surroundings.

A colleague of mine posted an article to Facebook las week, entitled *Self-Care isn't enough. We need Community Care to Thrive*, that described much of what I spoke about last week – community care, and community resilience. In the tag line Rev. Kristina stated: “The only sermon I ever preach: We need each other. Until we learn this in the depth of our bones, we will all suffer.”

There is a belief that ministers only every preach one sermon, with the same underline tones, that always files back to the same concept. Rev. Kristina’s one sermon: We need each other. Until we learn this in the depth of our bones we will suffer, fits for me this month. Resilience is in our community. Hope is looking towards those around us, and figuring out how to overcome our struggles together. Finding hope within our community, within our patterns, and our schedules of being together. This is part of the reason why we put time limits on leadership roles within our church, resilience. This is part of the reason why we gather for worship every week. Because worship means to acknowledge the worth of something, and we need to acknowledge the worth of our lives, our struggles, our challenges, in order to keep moving forward. In order to find hope. In order to find strength and resilience. Just like Vasilisa, if we continue to practice, continue our rituals, and make it through our struggles, we will be better for it.