

I'm just back from three weeks of medical leave. While I was away, I received many cards and thoughtful messages from this congregation. The care team brought nourishing food to my door. Your kindness has meant so much to me. Thank you. I have seen the healing spirit of this congregation in action a lot over the years. I know it's what we do. But it was a truly moving experience to find myself down and out, and on the receiving end of it. I am also so grateful to Bob and the staff team and Board of Directors for their support and good work. I knew the church would be in good hands.

These last two years have been hard for everyone, and they've certainly been stressful for ministers of congregations. I've also shared with you some of my own big challenges this year—the end of a twenty-five-year marriage, and coming out and all the collateral losses those two things entail. The deaths of several people I care about have also really affected me. I was beginning to sense a pile up of grief wanting my attention. I was fatigued and had a feeling of anxiety I couldn't quite shake. I had been increasingly forgetful and scattered, which can happen with grief and anxiety.

And then, in the middle of leading a memorial service last month, I was trying to open a door for airflow because, you know, the pandemic. The door was stuck, so I pushed it a little harder and as it snapped open, somehow it cut my hand. I am still not even sure how it happened, but it was a bad cut. Deep. Just... bad.

I stepped out of the service to try and figure out if I was going to have to go get medical attention. Several minutes later, I had bandaged it up and decided to power through—there were only about 20 minutes left. Afterward I went straight to my car, found a medical professional to fix it up, took some pain medicine, and I thought I was going to be okay. I really wanted to be okay.

But the next morning, I did not feel well at all, and shortly before I was supposed to start leading our Sunday services, I realized... I was late. I had *forgotten* what time church starts you guys. I am in my thirteenth year of ministry here and I forgot what time we start. I could not fool myself into thinking I was okay anymore.

I had to take some time away to heal, rest, grieve, find a therapist, and get on an antidepressant. Why am I telling you this? Because if all you ever saw was me up here in the pulpit looking well put together, you could get the idea that I've somehow risen above the messiness of life as a spiritual leader. But that's not the case at all. I'm like you—trying to live a whole, authentic human life true to the values of our faith. At times, each of us can be a healing presence for others. And

sometimes, we ourselves are the ones in need of healing. That's one of the things a religious community is for.

So that's what happened. I feel much better now. And I think it's really funny that I had already planned six weeks ago for today's sermon to be called "When Life Stinks." In another time, years ago, I once had a really terrible month and was dismayed to find I'd scheduled myself to preach a sermon at the end of it called "A Theology of Hope and Joy." This one will be easier.

My friends, sometimes life stinks. When it does, it helps to have a Unitarian Universalist faith.

You could probably sum up a UU approach to "life stinks" in about three lines: **Your suffering is not happening "for a reason." It is possible to find meaning in it. And you are not alone.**

It's not happening "for a reason." What do I mean by that? Most religious liberals do not hold the belief that suffering is a punishment for sin, and yet... when something bad happens, even the UU-est of us may very well find ourselves saying, "What did I do to deserve this?" Right? What did I do to deserve this? As though there were a logic of justice at work.

Or when we hear of someone diagnosed with some terrible illness, we might find ourselves trying come up with ideas about why that person got it. Have you ever done this? You tell yourself well, they smoked, or didn't exercise, or ate too much processed food, or maybe—and this is kind of a new age thing—they harbored negative feelings that somehow caused their illness.

I think that last one is really an unfortunate idea because it makes illness a punishment for feelings—and feelings are hard to control. Feelings come and go. We can control our responses to them, but not whether we experience them.

The thing is, all our conjecture does not necessarily explain things. My grandparents both smoked for over 30 years. My grandmother died of lung cancer in her 50's, shortly after quitting. My grandfather is about to turn ninety and is still pretty healthy. Who knows why? And, really, all of us are exposed to risk in our lives, right? But trying to explain why someone else got sick or hurt or whatever does have a way of shielding us onlookers from our own feelings of vulnerability and fear. If we think suffering is related to sin, or poor choices, or is in any way deserved, then, it follows, perhaps we can protect ourselves from it.

In the same way, when we ourselves are suffering, and we try to figure out what we did to deserve it, even if it's "I should have seen that car coming," or "I should have *known*," what we are really doing is grasping for some sense of control over the situation. If you think about it, psychologically it is easier to be at fault, and to accept the pain of that, than to be helpless.

I'm not saying we never get ourselves into trouble. We do. Suffering can be a natural consequence of our choices and actions—but there is a limit to it. And sometimes the consequence far outweighs the offense. A simple mistake while driving leads to permanent injury. That kind of thing. It doesn't add up. The universe just does not operate cleanly on the logic of justice.

Sometimes people suggest that a bad thing happened so that a good thing can follow from it. As though it's part of a plan. But again, the balance is so often out of scale—no good thing can make up for the loss of a child, for example—that in the end this logic is not very spiritually satisfying. Also, sometimes one misfortune follows another, in a kind of cascade.

So the evidence and moral and theological reasoning all suggest that **your suffering is not happening “for a reason.”**

**However, it is possible to find meaning in it.**

Finding meaning in it is different than finding the meaning of it. When people try to find *the* meaning of suffering, they come up with ideas like it's a punishment, or it's a test of our faith, or it is meant to make us stronger. *God never gives us more than we can handle*, some say. I remember thinking about this when I was a new mom and had postpartum depression.

I sure didn't feel like I was “handling” it. I felt completely flattened by it. But one day after another passed by and eventually I just came out the other side. Sometimes that's all you *can* do to “handle it.” Luckily, sometimes that's all you need to do.

Looking back, I do see that depression acquainted me with an inner resilience I would not discovered without some hardship, and deepened my understanding of what it is to be human. I have found meaning in it.

Other times, we transform pain into purpose by helping others. I once knew a young person who lost a parent to cancer and went on to become an oncologist. That kind of thing.

While I was on leave, I downloaded an app called We Croak. Several times a day it causes a notification to pop up on my phone screen that says, “Don't forget, you're going to die.”

Why would someone who is experiencing sadness and anxiety want a reminder that we're all gonna croak? Because it helps us to see today in the context of our whole lives. This day, this week, this year, is not the whole thing. It's just one part of a bigger story.

In Buddhism, they speak of “making friends with death.” It's the idea that in being truly present to our mortality, we gain clarity about the best and happiest way to live each day. Bhutan is a predominantly Buddhist country. We Croak's website says

the app was inspired by a Bhutanese folk saying: to be a happy person, one must contemplate death five times daily. The reminders are randomly timed, the website says. You know they are coming but you don't know when! Just like death.

Every time the We Croak app pops up with one of its messages, I feel more clarity and peace.

Humorously, it doesn't automatically have the same effect on another person who happens to glance at your phone when the app dings.

The poet and essayist Diane Ackerman says, "I don't want to get to the end of my life and find that I lived just to the length of it. I want to have lived the width of it as well."<sup>i</sup>

That's that full life perspective.

Another way to get a wide angle, long range perspective on our lives is to get outside. Spend a little time with vastness, whether it's mesa, mountain, forest, plain, or ocean. Do some stargazing or cloud watching. Breathe in the air. Experience the thing with all of your available senses. Remember what you are part of. Remember to what, or to whom, we belong.

I also know that sometimes everything—even the mountain and stars—can temporarily lose its magic when we are in deep pain. And that's when it is especially important to know that **you are not alone**.

Others have suffered and found meaning—it is the human experience—and we can find their stories in poetry, art, music, and other sacred texts. People grappling with suffering, trying to make some sense of it, trying to get through it—just like us.

We can call upon our ancestors. They don't have to be blood relatives. They may be connected to your life in direct or indirect ways. They may be spiritual ancestors.

Lately, I've been remembering a family member of my own who became an ancestor about fifteen years ago. She was a high femme woman who never left the house without lipstick on, had a big personality, did not seem interested in the family's conservative Christianity, and whom some in the family suspect had a female lover. She was of my great grandmother's generation. She lived through a whole century of ups and downs and changes. I feel connected with her now, and remember her zest for life. How in her nineties, she'd get all dolled up, perfume, powder, rouge, and go out to a restaurant and devour a whole plate of fried chicken.

Ancestors. This woman was my people.

Finally, you are also part of a congregation that cares about you, and your ministers care about you.

This is important because sometimes, when things are really bad, having faith means trusting the people who care about you when they tell you that joy and beauty will return to your life, that you are more than your pain, that you are loved.

However you are today, whether you are doing well and your presence here this morning is part of the healing spirit of this place, or whether you arrived in need of some healing, may you be held in kindness here. May you find all that you need to live a whole and authentic life, the full width and length of it. And may this faith be a blessing and a comfort to you.

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<sup>1</sup> Qtd. in Weller, Frances. The Wild Edge of Sorrow. 2017