

When the Center Does Not Hold
A Sermon offered by Rev. Kathleen C. Rolenz
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Did you ever have one of those weeks where everything seems to go wrong or break all at once? Now granted, these can be trivial events compared to the larger losses that we just heard about this morning, but they can certainly contribute to a sense of frustration, if not despair. One time, after a long litany of things that broke or went awry, the symbolic climax of all that was going wrong was with my computer. Trying to get on the internet, I kept getting the same message – “Can’t connect to proxy server.” I stayed up half the night doing battle with this proxy server thing, but to no avail. In the morning, I finally called a computer service and he said “it’s a virus and it’s buried deep into your operating system. You’ll have to bring it in, and it’ll cost 125.00 to fix it.” I asked him - what the purpose of this virus was – did these hackers want to access my information – could they get into my bank account – my credit history? He said “no. It’s just to mess with people. It’s just to show you how vulnerable you are.”

That is so wrong. At the same time, his words hit upon a deeper truth – that we are vulnerable to things beyond our control. There are times in our personal lives and in the life of the world that despite our efforts to have a normal, stable life, without having done anything to deserve it, the things that constitute our center fall apart, and the center, as Yeats said, does not hold.

If you happened to be here last Sunday, you may have heard Mark Marnocha talk about “flow” and what happens when things don’t flow. He referenced that famous line from Yeats, who at the time he wrote it, was talking about the aftermath of World War I, and he is bemoaning the decline of European civilization. I understand that this line was quoted more in the first seven months of 2016 than in any of the preceding 30 years, so he seems to have captured an anxiety that is out there in the wider world today – whether it’s about the on-going tensions in Israel and Palestine; or the absolute devastation that is in Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, whether it’s violence in the Ukraine, or in the neighborhoods of Milwaukee, and St. Paul.

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold, mere anarchy is loosed upon the world. Yeats’ poem has become prophetic – we have good reasons to feel sometimes like anarchy has been loosed in the world and that whatever center we may have imagined existed has fallen apart.

The world’s outer chaos can feel like a representation of our own inner chaos – of life out of balance – of the center, not holding. You know what I’m talking about. The small things and large that can knock you off your center are infinite. Your two year old chooses to have public melt-downs on a daily basis. Your pre-teen is exploring porn sites; your high school senior has decided that college or vocational training or a job are not for him; he wants to live in your basement and play video games; your husband or wife tells you he or she wants a divorce; you lose your job, your body parts are not working like they used to; your doctor comes into the room with a grave look on her face, your beloved dies. And what was your life – simply humming along in its predictable patterns has suddenly become filled with a drama that you did not expect and do not want. What do you do?

This morning I want to look at the different places where we go when we need to regain a sense of balance, to get back to that center which helps hold it all together. I put them in three groupings: we may seek Faith, we may seek the Familiar, or we seek may seek Fellowship to find our center once again.

Many people seek Faith in times of inner or outer chaos in the comfort of a single story – a story that once was or still is representative of a center, a story that frames everything that happens and that makes all the difficulty and evil that happens in the world and in our lives more bearable because it explains or at least soothes all the pain. That story could be that there is a God who loves us, that cares for each of us personally, and that we are saved or redeemed by the sacrifice of God’s son Jesus on the cross. That story could be about the greatness of one God who had a prophet and messenger named Muhammad; and that the teachings that Muhammad wrote down are salvific. To have any single story that we cling to during hard times can indeed be a great source of comfort, because the multiplicity of competing truths can be overwhelming. At the same time, any faith that can be summarized in a single saving story and truth can all too easily become doctrinaire and fundamentalist.

Unitarian Universalists have been accused of having no center because we won’t claim a single story and truth for everyone for all time, and because we see that as strength and not a weakness. I like to think of our faith as more like a Venn diagram, which is a picture of two or more overlapping circles.

The Venn diagram shows us that when there are many circles that overlap (and today you remember we are talking about circles of truth, circles of faith) the overlap always creates a third space – a third space that contains some of the truth of each of the overlapping circles, but is not the same as any of them. That third space has a unique character and inevitably it has to involve a different way to describe where its “center” can be found. I suppose there is a mathematical calculation that could help me find the center of this small and irregularly shaped space that is created by these overlapping circles, but maybe the mathematical center point of faith is not what we’re looking for here. Maybe that misses the point.

Because Unitarian Universalism does not claim one central story, it lives in this third space, this unique space formed by overlapping circles of truth. You ask any Unitarian Universalist “what is your faith when times are tough?” and you may hear different answers, some of them theologically framed and others not. People hear that I am a Unitarian Universalist Christian and they will expect me to say something about how God and Jesus and the Bible are the important things at the center of my faith and that’s where I turn– but as a Unitarian Universalist I also believe powerfully in the fact that there is more than one narrative, more than one center to the space my religion occupies, and that sustains me when I am in pain.

Living with more than one story doesn’t lend itself to easy and short sentences of description. If I’m scrupulous in describing myself, I guess I should claim to be a Christian Humanist Unitarian Universalist, because I find in each one of those four words a story that provides me with meaning. The Christian story of a man who was willing to die for a Great love inspires and comforts me. The Humanist story that insists on the human capacity to hold both reason and awe grounds me in

human hope. The Unitarian and Universalist stories point towards a long lineage of people who have struggled to make a uniting meaning and message out of two different faith traditions, and who want to see the world through the lens of love instead of depravity. These four stories guide and direct the way I want to live in the world and encourage me during hard times.

This third space has room for more than Faith to comfort me when I need to seek refuge from the chaos of the world. Some of what that space holds is Familiar comforts, people and places that we always turn to when we need healing. We turn to the familiarity of the natural world, and find the comfort and healing of what is wild in that third space. The poet Wendell Berry said it best:

*When despair grows in me
and I wake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake rests in his beauty on the water,
and the great heron feeds.
I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought of grief.
I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting for their light.
For a time I rest in the grace of the world,
and am free.*

We will also turn to the familiar companionship of family, and of friends. They are the circle of people who have been with you your whole life, and among them you will find people you can count on to stand by you when the center does not hold. There's not much more to say in a sermon like this about those family and friends who are closest to you. They are there in that third space of comfort and you all know what they mean to you. Think for a moment about who those people are and hold them in your hearts for a moment. (Silence)

I have one other Familiar Comfort that is always contained in this space I go to when the center does not hold. I always find when I need comfort in the midst of chaos that music is one of my go-to places. During my twenties, the music I listened to was rock and roll and punk rock, because I felt moved by the sheer chaos and anarchy of groups like the Sex Pistols and The Clash and the names of other bands that are unmentionable in public. It somehow reflected the inner confusion I felt. One day, a friend of mine sat me down and said, "Listen to this."

It was the music of Johann Sebastian Bach – a composer whose music I had never heard before. At first, I dismissed it as old dead white guy music, but then, started listening. I heard the statement of a clearly defined theme. It was shortly joined by another voice, responding to the theme, but in its own unique line. Other voices joined the theme, and for a while, I could not tell what had happened to that beginning line – it seemed pulled apart and swirling around in too many notes. At one point in the piece, the music seemed to be spinning out into the cosmos with no gravity – then free falling through space – I was frightened by it, and then, suddenly, there was the theme again –

maybe in a different key – with different voices, but it re-emerged and landed solidly back to where it began, not the same, but changed by the experience.

I realized that's what our lives are like. We each have our own theme. It's joined by other voices. For a while we may not be able to hear or see or understand where it's going, but there is an order amidst what appears to be chaos and it's our job to be faithful to the music that undergirds our whole lives, even when it seems to be spinning out of control.

This Fellowship often reminds me of a complex piece of music that has several intrinsic themes that hold it all together as many varied instruments play different sounds in different ways. I used the word Fellowship intentionally to describe the third component of where we might go when the center does not hold. It means this place where we sit today, but it's a word used for that broader sense of having companions in this human journey, companions who are not necessarily our family and closest friends but whom we recognize nevertheless as sharing this journey with us.

"All our lives we are in need – and others are in need of us," one of the readings from the grey hymnal reminds us. Even if you're brand new this Sunday – and don't know others sitting around you – I can tell you with a 100% certainty that whatever you're going through in your life – someone else in this congregation has gone through something similar. Parenting problems, health issues, aging parents, frightening diagnosis, loss of partner, spouse, child, job, self –esteem, mental health, it's all right here. So one of the "go to places" that help re-align our center is connecting with others in community.

I don't need to tell those of you who have been here for a long time about community, because these recent deaths have reminded me of what it means to be part of community over time. The women's group that Mary Kay Kamps was a member of has been around since at least 1992, and over the years those women have formed a bond that became a kind of safety net of support and strength. There is a men's group here that have known each other for over 30 years; there are book groups and support groups and interweaving ties and connections that are slowly and sometimes painstakingly built, yet it is times like these that you realize how important they've become – how life sustaining they are.

People presume that when they come to church they will find a comforting faith, and so sometimes this place and this community can be difficult to understand right away. It's hard to understand that the Fellowship is our faith, if you understand faith the way I do as "that in which you place your ultimate confidence." My uncle Rudy was a Catholic and a deeply religious man, and because he knew I was a lady priest, he always wanted to talk about religion. When he finally grasped what Unitarian Universalism was kinda about, he said "I wouldn't like that religion. I say my prayers, I go to mass, I get confession, and I'm done. Your religion sounds like too much work."

The center of his faith was grounded in an ancient and rich tradition. He didn't question the theology and didn't get involved in dogma, doctrines or politics. I envied his faith sometimes, because I knew that his simple approach to finding a faith that gave his life meaning worked for him. It's not that his faith made life trouble free – but he didn't struggle in the same way that I do – that I think we do – as Unitarian Universalists – with this idea of "what is *our* faith and how does it help us to deal with struggles of life?"

We can claim to be humanists or atheists or agnostics while still acknowledging the rich metaphors found in religious stories. We can be pagans and appreciate the complex meanings found in Christianity, in Islam, in Buddhism. We can be seekers, who haven't yet identified ourselves as having a particular theological center – and by that I mean a guiding belief system. Yet we have all come here to this Fellowship and find ourselves amidst a community of people who struggle, succeed, fail, live with uncertainty and doubt and who support one another throughout good times and bad times. It's a unique space that is the container for everything that comprises our center.

I probably should have included poetry in my list of the familiar things that help me find the center– poetry that keeps reminding me that my life is part of a grander arc – because I do keep coming back to poetry in this service today. This last poem that I want to share to conclude has one final piece of wisdom about what to do when the center does not hold. It reminds us that we need to have the patience to search and find the center again, in that space in your heart where faith and the familiar and fellowship all live together. Hear these words of Galway Kinnell, his poem “Wait.”

Wait, for now.

Distrust everything if you have to.

But trust the hours. Haven't they

Carried you everywhere, up to now?

Personal events will become interesting again.

Hair will become interesting.

Pain will become interesting.

Buds that open out of season will become interesting.

Second-hand gloves will become lovely again;

their memories are what give them the need for other hands.

I invite you now to take the hands of someone beside you, or, if for some reason you're uncomfortable holding hands, then simply make a connection with someone beside you.

Spirit of Life, we need no other hands but these. Though we may be challenged by life's circumstances, there are resources we can draw upon; our faith; those things that are familiar and comforting to us; and the Fellowship of other souls. We need no other hands but these; and we need no other truth but this – the way is often hard, the path is never clear, and the stakes are very high – but deep down there is another truth – you are not alone. May it be so.

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