

“The Family of Things”

Delivered by the Rev. Sadie Lansdale on October 14th, 2018.

During my second year of seminary, I served as a chaplain with the Fire Department in New York. I rode on ambulances with EMS, I wore clericals - that black shirt and a priest collar. I wore men's pants which have larger pockets than women's pants, and I had very short hair. The folks I served with, the medics and firefighters, were overwhelmingly Irish and Italian Catholics from Long Island and Staten Island. I would ride with one crew out of one station but we'd meet up with another crew from another station who didn't know me - So from those folks not from my station I got a lot of “hey, how are you, father”...uhhhhh. I would reassure them that I was the chaplain and that they could call me Sadie.

Crisis chaplaincy has prepared me well for our current political moment as we endure wave after wave of news: storms made worse by global warming, the stock market, the confirmation of Brett Kavanaugh to the Supreme Court and the threat to the rights so many of us have fought for, the climate reports which are dire and the thrashing around of the old guard that holds power as they hold it ever tighter, clinging and terrified that the world is about to turn and they will be left behind. Crisis chaplaincy has prepared me well for our world as it stands. It does feel a bit like apocalypse, sometimes.

You may be interested to know that apocalypse does not mean “the end of the world.” It means “the uncovering.” There is a message in that meaning for us today. Those of us who are only now, or only recently, or only after the 2016 elections, waking up to the dire realities of our global political and economic systems are late to the party - we are late to the party, and by the party I mean the horrible and violent truths underneath the comforts and the distractions of our daily lives. And there is some despair there - I imagine - to realize just how much we did not know or refused to see. Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.

After the 2016 presidential election, Detroit-based social justice facilitator and movement leader Adrienne Maree Brown said: “Things are not getting worse, they are getting uncovered. We must hold each other tight and continue to pull back the veil.”

As a chaplain for the fire department and in the psych ER - I had the veil pulled back, alright. But I wanted to pull back the veil by myself, I did not want anyone to hold me tight while I didn't - I wanted to look suffering in the face, I wanted to stare down death, I wanted to know, I wanted to see, because I knew that stuff was about to get real, and I didn't want to be surprised. I knew that going into ministry as a young person was going to kick me in the pants, so I wanted to see it all, see the worst, know it all, endure it all, rack up my list of horror stories so that I would not be taken unawares later on.

Part of me thought that I owed it to the world to be a witness - that I had something to make up for. I do not have any kind of a tragic or particularly interesting call to ministry - no great awakening, no great turning, no traumatic religious experience that Unitarian Universalism healed me from. I just grew up in a UU church that taught me right, and I wanted to pass it on. I feel healthy in my relationship to my own religious past. It's a good way to live, if you're lucky enough, but it doesn't make for any kind of a good story. And so I had come to believe, somehow, that I had not yet had anywhere close to my life's sorrows and I had better go tally some up sorrows real quick. I'm white, straight, able-bodied, cisgender, and I grew up with money and a great education and a healthy and loving family. I thought I owed it to the world to suffer as my neighbor suffered. I thought my life had been too easy so I chose the most difficult field education placement I could find - what they say about crisis chaplaincy is that we work in the places other people pray for. You do not have to be good. You do not have to walk on your knees for a hundred miles through the desert repenting.

I have had this poem committed to memory since I was 14. I can recite it in my sleep. It is one of the cornerstones of my prayer life - I prayed it every day as a chaplain, along with Psalm 23 and the Lord's Prayer in English and Spanish which came in handy. I can recite Wild Geese with the best of them but I always imagined myself telling someone else - you do not have to be good. Never did I hear it directed at myself.

You do not have to walk on your knees for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting for the sin of having been born lucky, and mostly safe. You do not have to be sorry for who you are.

Now, I no longer believe that you owe anybody your suffering and you will not see me living that way around here. I have, thankfully, learned that lesson.

You only have to let the soft animal of your body love what it loves. You only have to admit that you are a soft animal; you only have to live in your body and take care of it; you only have to love what you love, though the world will make it hard. You only have to love what you love.

This permission is deceptive, though - letting the soft animal of your body love what it loves. It could be misinterpreted as: don't worry about it, just do what you want. Or, permission to stay safe. Permission to forgo courage. Permission to steer clear of hard work, or hard conversations, or experiences that make us uncomfortable. That doesn't sit right.

Because the very real fear at the center of my life is that I can opt out of struggle if it gets too hard. Not having skin in the game, so to speak, is what renders white people untrustworthy in coalition-building with folks of color. This option is what privilege affords, the permission to quit on each other, the illusion that we can make it without our neighbors, the ability to turn away from the sorrows of the world, at least for a time. Shelter from the storm. The option to harden my heart against the suffering of other people. And that option is one that many people take.

I won't say very much about the recent news this morning - but I will say this. I am from nearly down the street from Brett Kavanaugh. I ran cross country and track races at his high school. I know the reputation of that school, and of many others in that sphere of ambition, and power, and influence, and affluence where I was raised.

The message we all received, loud and clear, in Northwest DC, in Bethesda, in certain parts of Northern Virginia - is that if your parents have enough money, and if they are inclined to protect you or their own good name from your sins, then you can hurt whomever you want your whole life long - and never face the consequences of your actions. You can harden your heart, and take no responsibility. The option is there, should you wish to bury your despair in the amassing of power and protection. Should you forget your true place in the family of things, should you

become disconnected from the world and the geese and the trumpet call of truth. The option is there to withdraw. To hide away in the country clubs and the exclusive private schools and the halls of power and to close off your heart to what the world is like for the rest.

So a lesson that I take from all this: there is nothing in any of those people who are leading our country right now that does not live in me or in you. There is no special depravity or cowardice that lives in some of us and not in us all. We are all capable of turning our backs on those who needs us when it matters most - we are all capable of doing, as Albus Dumbledore famously says in Harry Potter and the Sorceror's Stone, of doing what is easy instead of what is right. It is scary to pull back the veil, and nearly impossible if we do not hold each other close.

I pray all day long for the strength to stay in it, to witness and to care and to believe people when they tell me something I might not know, something that throws the world I experience into sharp relief. I pray that love, more than ego, more than safety, more than fear, more - even, though this is sometimes hard - more even than my justified and justifiable rage. That love will lead me to see the parts of our hurting world from which I have been protected, and love will let my heart break open, and love will allow me to tell somebody about it, and love will heal us all, and that love will put us to work.

This is our fourth principle - the free and responsible search for truth and meaning. It is not just about science, or about questioning religious doctrine; it is about developing a stomach for despair, developing the muscle, the courage, to ingest your own pain and the pain of other people. Truth is not nice, not something to be taken lightly, not an argument to be won or a point to be made.

The prophets who point to the truth in the Hebrew scriptures are often driven mad by it! And yet we, in our fourth principle, commit to trying to be able to receive truths responsibly, even and especially those truths that condemn us and tell us that we've got it all wrong. Which is immensely difficult. That principle, though I admit I went a little overboard with it, drove me straight into emergency work. My UU faith led me to the great and humbling work of witness, witnessing the truth in some tough and hidden places in our society.

Now, because we live in a country where the social safety net is precariously thin, because the gap between the rich and the poor grows ever wider, because healthcare is a privilege and not a right, because we have forgotten the most ancient command to love our neighbors, or else we have sentimentalized it and made it about being polite - because of all of those reasons, many, many calls to EMS are not emergencies at all. I cannot count the number of calls for someone experiencing homelessness who was sleeping on the sidewalk. And the neighbors who do not want to see evidence of the economic and political failures of a so-called developed country, who do not call upon the courage to pull back the veil, do not bother to tap somebody on the shoulder and ask how they're doing. They just call 911, and sometimes, the person is carted away. It is tremendously dehumanizing.

In the quiet moments after a call, when we were all sitting around in the ambulance, when the EMTs were filling out their paperwork and smoking cigarettes and coming down from the adrenaline rush of whatever we had just done - that was when they talked. And they told me about their families, their girlfriends, their plans to move up or become paramedics or firefighters - they told me about the grossest things they've ever seen, always trying to one-up each other, wanting me to know. Wanting somebody who wasn't in the trenches with them, so to speak, to witness their work. Wanting somebody to understand. To know about the death and the stench and the exhaustion and the compassion fatigue. To witness.

Isn't that what we all need? Tell me about despair - yours - and I will tell you mine. Witness. Your place in the family of things. And listen - you do not earn your place in the family of things. Through no good works, through no piety, through no amount of money you give to the church, through no number of volunteer hours you spend trying to be a good person - your place in the family of things is a birth right.

The Rev. Wesley Morris, longtime organizer with the Beloved Community Center here in Greensboro, will be installed as the Senior Pastor of the Faith Community Church downtown this

afternoon. He and I were in the same chaplain training cohort - when I was with the fire department he was working in Harlem Hospital. And we both agreed that the hardest - I mean the HARDEST - part of our work was our Monday afternoon process group where we had to tell 8 other people about our broken and beating hearts. We had to feel our rage and our sorrow and our frustration in front of other people! We had to be open, we had to be vulnerable, we had to tell about despair and it was the hardest thing I have ever done. Because that group was the site of transformation. Those people were our witnesses as we all cracked open. The sheer powerlessness we felt in the face of such preventable suffering broke us open wide. And no amount of thinking smart thoughts about it could prevent me from feeling such utter despair. I wanted, as I mentioned, to see it all, and know it all, to outrun death, to get ahead of the sorrows that surely were to come. And I wanted to do all of that while still maintaining my perfect grades and training for marathons and showing up at protests and sleeping eight hours a night and seeing my friends and reading for pleasure and dating and fitting in all of the things that were important to me into my very precise schedule - I wanted to do the very good work but I did not want to be affected by it at all. I wanted them all to tell me about despair, theirs - but I did not want to tell anybody mine. I wanted to know things and I wanted to fix things and I wanted to see behind the veil but I wanted to emerge from that experience unscathed, unchanged, untransformed, and just go about my business - a little wiser, maybe, but ultimately quite unaffected. Thankfully that was not to be.

You do not have to become somebody else in your search for truth and meaning. But you do have to become yourself, fully and utterly - and you could choose to be transformed by love at every turn, even when it breaks your heart.

It was love that drove me to that work and love that cracked me open when I couldn't save anyone or fix anything - it was love that drew me in and love that got me through and love that holds me and keeps me even now, even during the longest nights, even through the worst news, and it is love that will carry us all through the fire, though when we emerge we will surely, surely, be transformed.

May it be so, and amen.