

"WELCOME TOMORROW"

TELL STORY OF CLOSING FIRST MEETING WITH MIKE.

- Mike: "I wasn't sure what to expect."
- Me: "Neither did I."
- Mike: "What? Now that is a concern. You're supposed to be the expert!"
- Together: Laughter
- Me: "No, you're the expert of your own story and where that story is taking you."

We are the expert of our own stories, are we not? In this time of Coronavirus, a president that is indescribable, people who are so wanting of getting their haircut that they are willing to protest shoulder to shoulder at state capitals, I am reminded of the story of a young man who when attending a big party, a huge bar-b-que cookout, at a very wealthy Floridian's estate heard the wealthy host call out for everyone's attention. Their host was a rather eccentric man who filled his large swimming pool with alligators. He shouted to his guests, "If anyone is willing to jump in the pool, swim to the other side and survive I'll give that person a reward. they can have either \$10,000,000, a thousand-acre ranch with a mansion on it, or my daughter's hand in marriage." And just at that moment there is a big splash in the pool, the water churning, boiling with alligators rolling and their tails whipping the air. But just when everyone was sure the outcome was not to be seen; a young man pulls himself out of the pool. His clothes torn to shreds.

The wealthy, eccentric Floridian, like the rest of his guests, is astonished, amazed, impressed. He then says, "Young man, I'm a man of my word. Which of he three rewards do you want? \$10,000,000, a 1,000-acre ranch with a beautiful mansion, or my daughter's hand in marriage?

To which the young man replies, "I don't want any of those things. I just want the guy who pushed me in to the pool!"

There are times when we do not go voluntarily into the dark night, into moments, days, weeks not of our own choosing, but ones in which; nevertheless, we find ourselves. They can feel as threatening as a pool filled with alligators. A life-threatening diagnosis, a job no longer there to go to in the morning, a walking cane replaced with a wheelchair, loneliness that was dispelled by the pet who shared our home, best friend and companion gone too soon. And we wonder, how are we to get to the other side? In such times, how are we to welcome tomorrow?

We first begin by going to that place in which we find our safety, a safe space. For the past few weeks that has meant staying in place in our homes. And it has also meant being diligent in keeping our homes safe places to be. But there is also another kind of safe space we can enter. It is the space we create for each other.

I have never heard described such a space more poignantly than of a man who taught drama in a high school in Mountain View, California, not far from where I lived. The majority of his students were Latino. In the beginning he had to beg kids to join the class. On the first day of class he told his students that when they are asked to be on stage they must keep one thing only in mind. They must remember that the stage is a safe place. When on stage no one would be allowed to judge or criticize them.

That teacher recalls that those kids in his class came alive as the semester progressed. They sang, and acted, and improvised on that stage. And then the semester came to an end. But the class had been so successful that word got around and he was asked to teach another class of students. However, when he showed up for the first day of instruction there were not twenty students in the room. There were a little over forty teenagers in the room who had signed up for the class. All of them were Latino. All of them belonged to one of the gangs in town.

The teacher asked the students, "Why are you in gangs? What is there about a gang that makes you want to be a member?" The answer came like that of a chorus singing the same melody line. "In the gang we are somebody. In the gang we have fun. In the gang we hassle the police. In the gang we've got respect."

"Well," the teacher said, there are too many of you for this class. At most, I can only take twenty-five of you into the class. So, what I want each one of you to do is write an essay on why you want to be in this drama class."

Without objection the students took out pen and paper and began to write. When they had finished they turned their essays into the teacher who took them home to read and to decide which twenty-five of the forty students would be admitted into the class.

He says that as he began to read the essays they all began with a familiar plea. Every single student wrote in their essay, some of them only writing in big letters across the page, "I WANT OUT OF THE GANG. Please, help me to get out of my gang."

The teacher took the essays and met with the school counselors. Between the counselors and the teacher, they decided upon which of the students were most a risk for violence, most at risk to not making it through high school. Those were the students who were admitted into the class.

Asked what he thought was the thing that caused these teenagers to want to be in his class. He replied, "The stage had become known as a safe space." They wanted a safe place to be.

What that teacher created for those students is something of what this congregation is and continues to be called to be, creating a space for each other in which no one will be judged or criticized. Where we can sing, dance, and improvise. In this way it is by all definition a sanctuary, a place of safety and that is what makes it sacred. It is not unlike sanctuary cities today where immigrants are safe because the police decline to function as ICE. It is a place that makes possible a tomorrow for them and for us. Makes it possible for us to welcome it.

When we do create such a place, such sacred space for each other, tomorrow becomes more welcoming. It offers promise rather than despair or cynicism. The first step in waking up to a tomorrow that welcomes us, is for us to be open to it. That is a calling that comes to families, to those without families, to communities, governments, and yes, to congregations. There are no welcoming tomorrows without waking into them with anticipation, with an openness to see what tomorrow may bring.

I am reminded that when I was a kid. My buddies and I would ride our bicycles to a new housing tract that was being built and we would clamber down into the storm drains with our flashlights. The storm drains always began wide where we entered them. We would walk fully upright. But as our subterranean ventures always took us, the walls and ceilings of the storm drains would become increasingly narrow until we would have to crawl on our hands and knees. Eventually we would not be able to go any further. Each of our faces blocked by the posterior of the kid ahead of us. That is when we would all turn off our flashlights on the count of three. One. Two. Three. There we would be, in total darkness and quiet. After a very few minutes we would find ourselves attempting to quell the rising panic that grows inside of one when one is in the dark down in the narrow confines of a storm drain.

It was all part of the quest, the learning of how little movement there is when one begins from openness and moves toward narrowness. Inevitably there would always be that one kid who would at that moment of greatest control, equaled with abandon to the dark, would pass gas. As you can imagine, it is not easy when one is one one's hand's and knees in a constricted,

crowded storm drain to reverse direction quickly. Too quickly and one can become bruised, scraped, and scratched.

It may be a stretch to carry the analogy much further. However, permit me to say that our lives can sometimes feel like being in that storm drain. We start out in life open, possible, adventurous, with only the stars serving as canopy to our potential. We enter a relationship open to the other person with whom we feel whole. We begin a new job open to the challenge we have yet to discover in its job description.

Eventually, like most things we start out with openness but then move into the narrow, more confining ideas, expectations, about who we are or are supposed to become, or the same with others in our lives, who we think they should be or become, until we cannot go forward anymore, finding ourselves without light to guide us. Sometimes something happens and we get out of that space as quickly as possible. We get a flash of insight or confirmation of a dream we've held that propels us onto a different more welcoming stage. Or at other times, something tragic happens and life's assurances are peeled away, and we are forced into the open quickly so as to quell the panic. But most often, I think, we move into openness, into tomorrow more slowly in order to lessen the possibilities for being bruised or scraped or scratched too badly.

In the past few weeks, I very much appreciate the times I've been with your Pastoral Associates through our meetings in Zoom. I know I tell you nothing you don't already know when I say, they are amazing, outstanding people. Their commitment and wish to be available to all of you when you find yourself in one of those questioning, uncertain times that feels like being in the storm drain is something you can count on. They not only know how to caringly listen but to do it in a way that creates the safe stage on which to have our bruises, scrapes, and scratches gently attended to. Afford yourself to their ministry of pastoral care. You are fortunate to have them amongst you.

It is with folks like them and our attentiveness, openness with one another, without judgment, without criticism that gives each of one us permission to move into tomorrow, to welcome it and let it welcome us. Think to yourself, ask yourself, "What are some ways in the tomorrow to come that what I say, what I do can give permission to help another to welcome their tomorrow, to help make it a safe space. In this time of Covid-19, screwed up politics, people anxious about tomorrow, a world in grief, know that there is a safe shore out there though we may not quite see it beyond the horizon from which we sail today. But it is there. It is the stage we create for one another.

"WELCOME TOMORROW"
Reverend David Franks
Message delivered at Unitarian Universalists of Clearwater
April 26, 2020

I leave you with this from the Talmud.

Do not be daunted
by the enormity
of the world's grief.
Do justly, now.
Love mercy, now.
Walk humbly, now.
You are not obligated
to complete the work ,
but neither are you free
to abandon it.

Justice, mercy, humbleness are the ways that not only help us to welcome tomorrow but help us to love ourselves and one another within it so that there be more tomorrows to welcome us.

Zoom rehearsal link
Join Zoom Meeting
<https://zoom.us/j/94725965189>