

Learning from Sabbatical Part II
Inhabiting our Lives
Unitarian Universalist Church of Vancouver
August 27, 2023

Reflection on the Theme by Allison King

Many of you know that my father died a few months ago. He left a literal and figurative mess, and my siblings and I have the task of cleaning it all up. I am the youngest of 3 - my brother, the eldest, is an actual rocket scientist, and a very analytical, linear thinker. My sister, the middle child, is an educator and a musician, and is an intuitive and - whatever the opposite of linear is - thinker. We also live in 3 different states - my brother is in California, and my sister is in Hawaii. Finding time to connect and collaborate on all that needs doing is quite the challenge.

Even though my sister is the middle child, and a quintessential one at that, this process of sorting through my father's financial and physical goods has actually left me in the middle. Weirdly, I can understand my left-brained, logical brother, and I can understand my right-brained, intuitive sister, but they don't understand each other. Ever. So I've been the one in the middle, the interpreter, the mediator. I can't say that I like it.

In reading the children's story, I thought "that is so me." I have spent my life as that person trying to smooth things over, soften hard situations, and keep conflict at bay. Never has this tendency bubbled up to bite me more than it has during this time. My sister calls me to complain about my brother. My brother calls me to complain about my sister. The only good thing about this is that I'm pretty sure they aren't talking to each other to complain about *me*.

So, I listen. I try to give them each the other's perspective in a way that I think they will hear. I try to gently nudge them towards a different way of thinking, or let them know how I would feel if they had said that thing to me. I try to call them out in a way that doesn't shut them down.

I'm exhausted. I'm cracking.

I have to admit that I did feel a little bit proud of myself when they were bickering over our group text, and I wrote "We're all hurting right now. Can we offer each other compassion? This isn't the time or the way to have this discussion." I haven't spent all of these years in the UU church for nothing! I got a thumbs up response. The quiet lasted - for about 24 hours.

In a later conversation with my sister, she, in her ever-intuitive way, asked, "are you okay? You sound tired." So I told her. I told her that the conflict between her and my brother was stressing me out to the point of keeping me up at night, so yeah, I'm tired. She said, "Okay, I'll stop." To which I thought, "so you are doing it on purpose!" And she did stop. For about a week.

So, it continues. But I had a revelation last week - I'm just not going to do it any more. I need to set clearer boundaries with them, and refuse to act as the communication conduit. Like our eggy friend, I'm going to take some space from this arena and do a little bit of shell repair. But unlike our cholesterol-challenged friend, I'm not going back to the store. I'm not going back to the egg carton.

My mother used to call me a good egg - “Oh, Allison will do that, she’s such a good egg,” but I don’t want to be a good egg. I want to be a great egg. A Grade-A, organic, free-range, pasture-raised, *exceptional* egg, with a sturdy shell that won’t crack under pressure. Sometimes, we talk about a person “being in a shell” as a bad thing, and sometimes it can be. In this case, I feel that I need to toughen my shell so that it can be more protective. You can turn up the heat a little, but I won’t get cooked. Not anymore.

Inhabiting our Lives© by Rev. Kathryn A. Bert

“By its very nature, our social and economic culture generates chronic stressors that undermine wellbeing in the most serious of ways,” write Gabor and Daniel Maté. Two weeks ago, Eric LaBrant gave an excellent sermon on the problems of Capitalism and our unexamined acceptance of some of its very troubling effects, such as the dehumanization of workers and destruction of our environment. Capitalism provides that basis for the social and economic culture that the Matés are writing about with stressors which undermine our wellbeing, and with increasing force over the past several decades.

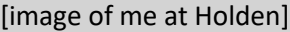

Then, of course, there is the way we respond to those stressors, the patterns of behavior we learned in our families in order to survive. Allison learned how to communicate with each of her siblings, and to translate for them when they couldn’t communicate with each other. Many of us try to be that Good Egg, and it is exhausting, as Allison attested to this morning. As I experienced last year as I vowed to sleep the entire month of March, my first month of sabbatical.

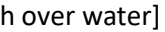
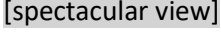
If you are new this morning, I’ve been serving this congregation for six years as minister. Last spring, I took a five month sabbatical away from the church, which is a benefit written into minister’s contracts. I had served another church before this one, and took a seven month sabbatical after seven years of service there.

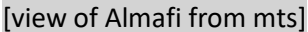
Erin checked with me before she used this story for all ages – she wanted to make sure the congregation didn’t think that she was calling them Bad Eggs! I assured her that I would explain in the sermon that it is not that the Good Egg is so good or that the Bad Eggs are so bad. It is the perspective we hold, the worldview we put on, the way we respond to those social and economic cultural pressures and the stress of living in a Capitalist society.

Being the second sabbatical of my career, I think I was better prepared for this sabbatical and was able to derive more benefit from it. I spent much of the time reflecting about how to maintain a sense of balance, which I had understandably lost during the pandemic, along with much of the world’s population. I wanted to return to this career I love, but not as the Good Egg, trying to fix bad behavior, keep the peace and taking charge. I took charge a lot during the shut-down, because I think the congregation needed me to, there was so much uncertainty and volunteers – well, are volunteers - and most of you have other jobs and families and responsibilities during the crisis that you had to attend to. But I don’t think ministry is about taking charge, under better circumstances. I think it’s about empowering others to do the work, and providing the inspiration and leading collective liberation, comforting the afflicted and afflicting the comfortable, as John Kenneth Galbraith said, “especially when they are comfortably, contentedly, even happily wrong.” I don’t think you called me to fix bad behavior, keep the peace and take charge. I think you called me to help you deepen your spiritual experience, grow the beloved community, and act on your values in the wider world.


So, I'd like to share with you this morning some of what I did on sabbatical and what I learned about sustaining a balanced and joyful life even while doing things that are hard and important.

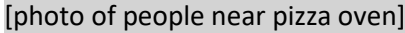
After sleeping the month of March, I left for Holden Village which is a Lutheran retreat center in the Cascade Mountains.  The Lutheran pastors I've met there say it's really Lutheran-UU, and that's been my experience over the years. It is a very liberal intentional religious community in an isolated former mining village. It's a great place to unplug – given there's no internet or cell phone connection – and unwind. My intent was to go hiking and get in shape for a hiking trip we had planned in Italy later in April, only I hadn't counted on the six feet of snow they still had in early April! 

But just as we had learned to do in the early days of the pandemic, I improvised. I learned that all the service roads had to be plowed, so I was able to hike on them. I also put on snow shoes and did some of that – which is a great way to get in shape. And the lesson I always seem to learn at Holden presented itself to me again – apparently, I need to learn to not assume I know where I am. I've been lost a few times in those Cascades! This time, I took what I thought was a shortcut and did a posthole. Pulling my foot out of the deep hole, my boot remained in the snow. I was able to retrieve it, only to lose the boot off my other foot when I stepped again. It was about then that I realized the path I thought I was on, was not a path at all, but snow fallen over a running stream –  Railroad Creek and if I weren't extremely careful, I would plunge into the water below and likely perish. I was not 10 inches from the service road, and as I am here today to tell you the story, I clearly made it to the road. But I am always reminded in the wilderness how close we all are to mistakes from which we could not recover. And yet, I continue to risk it because the view is so spectacular.  I remembered on sabbatical how much I love a good adventure! And I resolved to keep adventuring in my life, keep exploring, keep taking – well more measured and reasonable – risks.

And so the next adventure I took – the big trip – once in a lifetime kind of trip – was with my husband, Stuart, to go hiking on the Almani coast of Italy. 

Now, to be truthful, the only reason we picked Italy was because it was the earliest of the hiking trips provided by the Customwalks Tour company we had chosen. We had a May wedding to attend, and the last thing I wanted to risk was being stuck abroad with covid while my son got married in Michigan. So, we picked this hiking tour of the Almani coast where I learned that one week of snowshoeing in the Cascade Mts. does not get the body fit enough for 5-7 miles of hiking a day for 7 days in Italy. We did it, but it was harder than I had anticipated. There were a lot of stairs.

 Here's a photo of our hiking group – our guide, Dennis, in front, and our guide Francesca is the woman in the back with her hands raised. The reason we chose Italy was entirely practical, but the impact of Italy was incredible. Both Stuart and I fell in love with the country and the people. I studied a little Italian before we went – listening to podcasts and borrowing an old Italian textbook from a friend, but many Italians speak English and when they didn't, our Spanish served well to communicate.

 Here's another photo of our hiking group, but with the three Italians who taught us how to make pizza – the two women don't speak English, but I found I could make myself completely understood with my Spanish that night. Meals were long affairs – took place over hours, even when we weren't learning to do the cooking ourselves.

[photo of lunch in Raggiolo] This meal lasted three hours long – it was the best food I have had in my life – and, for whatever reason, I cannot tell you what I ate. I don't remember. I just remember thinking as I ate the meal that this was the best food I had eaten, ever.

The day we booked the hiking tour of the Almani coast, I got an email from David Wilcox, who is a folk musician that Stuart and I have been following since my early seminary days. It was an email, inviting his fans to join him at a castle in Tuscany [image of Porciano Castle] for music and tours – and that trip began the day after our hiking trip ended. It was an irresistible offer and so we stretched and added it on. Unfortunately, just before this trip was to begin, David Wilcox broke his collarbone in a biking accident and didn't join us. But the tour went on, and another musician, Andy Gullahorn, was always planning to join us and he provided the music. [image of Andy Gullahorn playing in the castle livingroom]

It wasn't only meals that were slow in Italy. Time slowed down for me considerably. The owner of the first vineyard where we had a wine-tasting kept admonishing us to slow down when we ate – that there was “no stress.” No stress” It amused me that he kept directing his remarks to our Italian guide, Dennis, who was wolfing down his food. [image of Stuart and hikers at Tagliaferro winery]

And because we sometimes came into a restaurant or eatery with such a large group of people, we often got served at quite different times. We were told to eat when our food arrived, not to wait as is “polite” in British and American society.

I'd read *Eat, Pray, Love* by Elizabeth Gilbert, the biography of her journey of healing in Italy, India, and Indonesia – and the part of her journey in Italy was all about eating and enjoying life, which I didn't fully appreciate until I was in Italy eating and enjoying life. You all came this close to my not returning- had it not been for the wedding of our son in May – I could have talked myself into buying a little house for sale in Stia, Italy, (for \$90,000) and retiring then and there. [view of Stia, Italy] But I knew that some of the enjoyment I was experiencing had to do with the fact that we were “on vacation” – we had vacated the everyday responsibilities of our lives and that wherever I lived, those responsibilities of life would return. What I wanted and needed to do was not vacate my life, but inhabit it. I wanted to figure out how to find the enjoyment I was experiencing in Italy, when I returned to living in Vancouver.

Ironically, part of the answer for me came out of a bicycle accident. Not David Wilcox', but my own. One of the activities offered to us was to go on a biking tour of Tuscany. They rented ebikes for us. These rental bikes were old and very heavy and I had never been on an ebike before. I'm short, and so it was hard to find a bike where I could get my feet to the ground without falling over, which I promptly did, before even starting out. I'm so grateful I was wearing a helmet, because this was another moment on my sabbatical where I may not have recovered from a mistake. I managed to fall straight back on my head. My head only hurt a little as I was wearing a helmet, but as time went on and I felt the bruises which had appeared on my legs and arms, and my head was still sore, I realized I was not going to be able to go on this bike ride – it was a terrible disappointment.

[bikers in Tuscany] This is a photo from those who did go on that ride, including my husband. Because I had determined that I like adventure and need to incorporate adventure more into my life, I was, upon my return to the United States, determined to get on an ebike and learn how not to fall off – which I have now done, and I can't tell you how much I enjoy getting on that bike and commuting to work. It's so much more fun than driving a car, for me.

My sabbatical was not all vacation and adventure. I actually worked with a somatic therapist – she’s someone I work with year-round, but the work felt more impactful during this time away from work.

When I’m working, I’m often processing with a therapist whatever is going on with church so that I can show up as my best self for you. While I was on sabbatical, I didn’t have to use that time to process church things, and was able to more fully focus on my own functioning.

If you’ve never heard of somatic therapy, you’re not alone. You’ve likely heard of mindfulness meditation or mind-body stress reduction, and these are other mind-body approaches, which differ from talk therapy in that it is not just focused on the thoughts in our heads. In somatic therapy, the treatment focuses on the body and how emotions appear within the body. If you read Resmaa Menakem, *My Grandmother’s Hands*, or Bessel van der Kolk’s *The Body Keeps the Score*, you’ll have a peak into the work I’ve been doing.

I’ve always been fascinated by the fact that on some days I can face circumstances – say of a long ‘to do’ list and a full email inbox – with completely different attitudes. Sometimes, I’m sorry to report, a long ‘to do’ list and a full email inbox would fill me with fear and even dread. But then, occasionally, with the exact same ‘to do’ list and inbox just as full, I could face the work with energy and joy. Clearly, it is not the circumstances that affect my attitude, but something in me that changes.

Or often when I’m traveling, I tend to worry on the last day of a trip and don’t get to enjoy the final day fully for worry about the travel to come and matters at home. I’m happy to report that on our last morning at the castle, in Italy, I noticed absolutely none of that. I enjoyed a cappuccino on the little table outside the castle and visited with one of the castle owners, watching everyone get their suitcases on the van and observed in me a calm that was not so familiar - I was not in the least bit worried about the van ride or train ride or plane ride to come, but was able to breathe in the last moments of Tuscan air.

And that is what I’ve been exploring more fully in somatic therapy. It has to do with our autonomic nervous system and a theory by Dr. Stephen Porges called the polyvagal theory which explores the role of the vagus nerve in regulating our health and behavior. Bottom line is that we can work with our bodies to help shift our mood, once we understand how this all works and what our bodies are doing to protect us, that over time, if not regulated, can also lead to harm and disease.

The Good Egg in the story has to leave their carton of eggs to go “find themselves” – really, what they’re doing is finding their equilibrium (I’m using they/them pronouns for our Good Egg because I don’t know otherwise from the story). And that’s very much what sabbatical was like for me.

It wasn’t the carton of “bad eggs” that was causing the Good Egg such grief, it was that the Good Egg had labeled the other eggs as bad and themselves as good and had created a story to explain their attitude or mood. (and just for the record, and to offer some assurance to Erin who told the story, I’ve never thought of this congregation as a bad congregation, though perhaps I do sometimes think of myself as a good egg)

The circumstance wasn’t the problem. Just as Allison’s siblings using her to communicate with each other isn’t the problem. The problem is how Allison responds to her siblings’ behavior and the story she creates about it. Learning how our bodies respond to stress, and how we can regulate that response helps us create that sturdy shell that won’t crack under pressure. And we are all under pressure. “By its very nature our social and economic culture generates chronic stressors that undermine wellbeing in the most serious of ways” write Gabor and Daniel Maté.

“Sometimes in our lives we all have pain and sorrow, but if we’re wise we know there’s always tomorrow,” wrote singer-songwriter, Bill Withers. Music itself is one way to regulate your mood, as I’m sure you experienced last week in the worship that Allison led about our hymnody. And so I’ll invite you to sing and to lean, for we need each other if we are to build those sturdy shells and “to promise with people to be partners in this long-haul work of loving and becoming, as Gretchen Haley names it, even while we grieve also the cost which is not small and lingers in our hearts and turns only sometimes to rage. Here let your body tell the truth. Shake free the stories that live in your skin, breathe in your beauty, and breathe out your burdens. Breathe in our beauty, breathe out our burdens.”