

What are WE going to do about it?
Unitarian Universalist Church of Vancouver
July 27, 2025

Reflection on the Theme – Jeff Coleman Payne

Later in the service, you'll hear a reading from "The Age of Overwhelm - Strategies for the Long Hall" by Laura van Dernoot Lipsky. Just the title alone is enough to make me squirm. It's easy right now to be overwhelmed.

Reading through this brought back memories of my college years and the courses that I took on clown doctoring and medical clowning and what I learned about how to deal with these kind of feelings. The idea of clown doctoring and medical clowning is to bring humor, love and joy into healthcare settings that can otherwise be scary and intimidating places and this idea has been put into practice all around the world. In my little corner of the world, in Windsor, Ontario, Dr. Warren led our class through a brief introduction and training in clowning where we created our own clown doctor persona and learned techniques in clowning (Here I am in my clown doctor persona) and then used these techniques within healthcare settings around the Windsor region. One of the most important parts of this course was reading "La Rire Medicin: The Journal of Dr. Giraffe" by Caroline Simonds and Dr. Bernie Warren. Caroline Simonds, while not from France, started Le Rire Medicin (translated to Laughter Doctors in English) like others have done around the world.

As we talk about "The Age of Overwhelm", I can't think of anything more overwhelming than working in healthcare settings and hospitals and I'm grateful to those of you and anybody in our community and in our world that choose to care for others, thank you for what you do. In her book, Caroline Simonds writes about the daily life of being a clown doctor working in pediatric oncology and pediatric intensive care units in France and dedicates large sections of her book to discussing the pain, heartbreak and loss of her experiences. She also wrote about her preparation and how she would spend an hour before her shift slowly putting on her costume and make-up to be able to prepare herself mentally and then similarly slowly and meditatively removing her make up and costume to shield herself and separate herself with her clown character. This became a habit of mine as well. While I never worked in oncology or intensive care, I was able to do rounds and work with children and families who were experiencing extremely challenging circumstances and these experiences did weigh heavy on me. The slow and methodical way I took on and off my costume at the beginning of my shift allowed me to both enter and exit a space where I could sit in the hard places with joy, laughter and humor without letting it get overwhelming. It's easy to be overwhelmed and like Caroline Simonds, Dr. Bernie Warren and others within this field have taught me, it's important to do the work, even if it seems impossible or a struggle.

What are WE Going to Do about It© by Rev. Kathryn A. Bert

Sacred music, such as Alexis' has been singing for us this morning, is designed to elevate our feelings, to inspire us to higher thoughts and greater motives and connect us with a wider view. It truly does that. Of course, one can have a personal association with the music that can change its meaning. A happy song may have been playing when you received tragic news, changing the significance of that music forever for you personally.

I'll give you a personal example. My sister's husband, Ken, died suddenly and tragically before he reached his 50th birthday. She had a 4 year old daughter, and he had three older sons by a previous marriage. He was also a 5th grade teacher in a very small town, so it was a very big deal to the whole town and not just his family. But what I remember about the memorial service – held in the gymnasium of the local middle school - was the music. *O Holy Night!* was the closing piece, and it was intentional. He died in December and Christmas was upon us. Though Ken wasn't religious, there were a number of Catholics in his family and extended family. It seemed comforting to the Catholics, but the version my sister chose, Johnny Mathis and the Percy Faith Orchestra, had an additional meaning to my sister: Johnny Mathis was Ken's go to makeout music. It made me smile hearing it at the end of that memorial service, as it does to this day whenever I hear it, probably not in the way Johnny Mathis or the composer intended.

These pieces of music that Alexis has chosen, which have been around for centuries, will have different meanings to each of you. They may have positive associations or negative ones, or anything in between. But the truth is, you probably don't listen to them neutrally. You hear the music, and something shifts. There's an emotional response, and of course, that's what music does. It's why we have music in church and why we sing hymns and songs. It's also why sometimes people object to too much music in a worship service – because they don't wish to *feel* all those feelings – some people prefer the intellectual exercise of the sermon without all those pesky feelings to confuse the matter. (I learned this my first year here when I added a hymn to your liturgy. You'd have thought I had added animal sacrifice to the liturgy, the reaction from some was so strongly negative!)

Emily gave us a lot to think about last Sunday. If you weren't here, Emily Layfield preached on the ethics of feeling. If you weren't here – and I wasn't – you can listen to past sermons on our website or subscribe to our Spotify podcast to catch up. In any case, Emily talked about how we sometimes suffer to pay homage to or witness those who are suffering, even when we are not the ones in the war zone, or starving, or diseased, or any number of ways humans beings are harmed. Or if we're not sharing grief to prove something, we feel guilty when we aren't suffering *because* so many other humans are.

She named this cycle as counterproductive in three ways:

1. Suffering and despair don't help us act, but rather shut us down from taking any action at all
2. If we repeat the kind of thoughts that lead to despair we are training our brains to despair which comes easier and easier, making it harder and harder to take any action at all
3. And finally, by leaning into guilt and despair rather than taking action, we prioritize suffering over progress.

Emily last week, like Jeff this week, gave examples of clowning to not only counter despair but make positive change. Jeff took a course on medical clowning – did you even know there was such a thing? And Emily talked about the mimes – pantomimes - in Colombia employed to shift the high pedestrian deaths by silently mocking jaywalkers and celebrating those who used crosswalks and obeyed traffic lights. Great examples of actions which help us shift our mood, attitude, outlook and ultimately, our actions.

I titled this sermon *What are WE going to do about it all?* because, as the speakers before me have said, it is all too easy to fall into despair when the world is falling apart. When Emily talked about repeating

the kinds of thoughts that lead to despair actually training our brains in despair and inaction, she is describing what we call a Vicious Cycle.

This was the name of a chapter in the 2025 book, *Everything is Tuberculosis* by John Green, which I've just finished. I highly recommend it. This chapter called *Vicious Cycles* ends with this quote which I share to explain how vicious cycles work: (Tuberculosis, of course, is the illness the quote is referring to)

"It's an illness of poverty that worsens poverty. It's an illness that worsens other illnesses, from HIV to diabetes. It's an illness of weak healthcare systems that weakens healthcare systems. It's an illness of malnutrition that worsens malnutrition. Illness of the stigmatized that worsens stigmatization.

"In the face of all this, it is easy to despair. TB doesn't just flow through the meandering river of injustice, TB broadens and deepens that river."

Fortunately, there is also a chapter in this book called *Virtuous Cycles* which, as you can imagine, is quite the opposite. Virtuous Cycles are what we seek to create, catch and leverage in order to shift things and make them better.

"One day, for no particular reason, nothing was going right. Absolutely, positively, nothing was going right." says children's author, Marc Colagiovanni "So...I decided to go left." As a left-handed person, I particularly appreciate that line.

The problem with vicious cycles is that when we are caught up in them, we rarely find the humor. And if we can't find the humor, we usually can't find the way out of them.

The staff of this church are currently reading the book *The Age of Overwhelm: Strategies for the Long Haul*, the book from which Jeff read and referred to in his reflection this morning. The members of the staff of this church, like the volunteers and I daresay all of you, get overwhelmed from time to time. This "unrecognizable landscape," as Laura van Dernoot Lipsky puts it, puts stress on us all, from its simple unfamiliarity to its inhumane cruelty. The ongoing crisis in Gaza, the starvation of aid workers trying to get food to the starving people including children, is just one example, and you know many, many others.

We are in the 'Age of Overwhelm' and this book offers strategies for the long haul. One of my favorite aspects of this book are its cartoons. Months ago, I had the great idea of writing to the New Yorker where most of the cartoons are from to ask permission to project them for you in worship, but I never took action – in part because there were so many other things to attend to and I didn't prioritize it. In retrospect, for those who can't see the screen, it's probably best that I describe them anyway. So here's one of my favorites. But let me give you the context first. In this chapter, the author is talking about employing discipline to help maintain perspective. She writes,

"Given the volume of demands on us, and stimuli around us, and the extremity of so much of what is unfolding around the world... It can, at times, feel draining to intentionally direct where our focus is as opposed to constantly playing defense against distractions in our surroundings. Be disciplined. Be gentle." She writes, "When we maximize intention and minimize impulse, we are better positioned to make decisions that serve us for the long haul."

Here's a cartoon in that chapter – there's a man wearing a dog cone over his head – you know the kind we put on dogs when we need them to not be able to lick and reopen their wounds? So, instead, a man

is wearing a cone on his head. He has a glass of wine in his hand and he's talking to a woman with a glass of wine in her hand. They're obviously socializing at a cocktail party. The man is talking. The caption reads, "It keeps me from looking at my phone every two seconds."

Here's another one: Two people in medieval suits of armor on horses facing an army of people on horses with suits of armor and weapons on the attack. One of the two on the one side is saying, "Maybe you shouldn't send out emails when you're tired."

Humor has a way of making a point in a way that we can digest it. Sometimes dry prose or a dry sermon doesn't shift anything. In fact, we know that facts don't actually change opinions, as I'm reminded by the Builders Project – that research project I keep mentioning in sermons on reducing toxic polarization (Peter T. Coleman's research) – specifically the political polarization in this country. Social psychologist, Jonathan Haidt, points out in *The Righteous Mind*, we don't actually arrive at our opinions through reason and logic (as much as we'd like to believe that to be true), but rather our emotions, experiences and subconscious decide what we want to believe and then our conscious thought process and logic try to justify our beliefs.

Which is why worship is designed to be an emotional experience with all that music and ritual, so that we might have a change of heart. Because the truth is – and I know how unsatisfying this answer is – we can only change ourselves, not others.

What can WE do about it? I know that some of you came here today hoping I would have the answers, or an answer – but honestly, did you really think I had an answer that someone else hadn't already thought of and tried?

What I think I know is this: first of all, there is no single answer just as there is no single person with the answer. That's why I put "we" in capital letters in my title. It's always we. We have to work together, just as we have to stick together.

Secondly, what I know is that we can't find the answer if we're overwhelmed and in despair – just as Emily preached last week, despair does not lead to action. So, it is our task to maintain perspective and work on our own strategies for the long haul – like maximizing intention and minimizing impulse, or being responsive without being reactive, disconnecting less and being present more. These are all things that, I hope, coming to church helps with. It reminds us that we are a *we* and not a *poor little me*. And it should help us with impulse control – noticing how our intentions play out and correcting our actions if they don't have the impact we intended. This intentional hour we spend together, not looking at our phone – well, at least, I'm not looking at my phone – this hour we spend together each week reminds us that we can attend to what matters and leave the noise or the clutter, the distractions, behind.

I also know that while it may seem that the world is falling apart more seriously and precipitously than ever before, every generation has thought that was the case. Though in my heart I do believe we are on the brink of collapse such as we've never experienced before, it gives me a strange hope that others before us thought so (even if they were wrong) because that means we, too, can carry on and take steps and move forward, as our ancestors did despite their belief that the end was near. Does that make sense?

I attended the Unitarian Universalist Association General Assembly in Baltimore in June, and before that in Baltimore was Ministry Days— a chance for UU ministers across the continent to gather and connect. There's workshops and worship and collegial conversations. One of the sessions I attended was called "Rest as Resistance." Ironically, I missed the first part because I was in my hotel room napping. So, when I went into the second part I was feeling like I should probably skip it and go to a different session, but I was curious. The facilitator had us try various ways to calm our nervous systems and relax, from prayer to poetry, body scans to walking meditation, journaling and coloring – and I realized that my repertoire is pretty limited. I meditate and I nap. Sometimes my meditation turns into a nap, but mostly they're very distinct activities. But they're only two. And this workshop opened me up to so many other ways of resting and relaxing and replenishing myself for the work. And this is really key because a rested body, a relaxed body, is better able to enter the world with creativity, responsiveness, energy and focus. We need all the creativity, energy and focus we can muster to do the things we do to improve the state of the world.

It's my suspicion that you already know what you need to be doing – that you're already doing it. You may want to do more of it. Or you may need to do something slightly different, but you're probably doing it, whether it be writing to your representatives, or digging deep into a particular issue – say climate change or racism or poverty, perhaps you're working with a political party or a part of League of Women Voters or Indivisible, or perhaps you're a school teacher, teaching critical thinking skills and combating misinformation, or a librarian, researcher, or you're a day laborer, providing the work that needs doing, or you're a parent raising children in this upside down world. I suspect you know what to do, but you need the energy and encouragement, you need the support and you need partners. Our collective actions matter, the demonstrations and rallies, and our individual actions matter, too. The thing you do today may be the very thing that begins a Virtuous Cycle, compounding positive action upon action that begins to shift things for the better. The options I want to offer you this morning for what to do about the world are as plentiful and unique as the people in this room. Find your thing and do it well. Do it with intention. Do it with others. Do it creatively. With humor and perspective. Do it with persistence, with clarity, and, above all, do it with love.