

Wuthering

The Sudden Obliteration of Expectation
Unitarian Universalist Church of Olinda

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Since 2007, the brothers Hank and John Green have been communicating with each other long-distance via YouTube. Each week, they post a message to each other – Hank posts on Fridays, and John posts on Tuesdays. They make their posts public, often speaking to the wider audience of the world wide web.

These video web logs, or *vlogs*, have made their channel – the *vlogbrothers* – one of the most longstanding and influential channels on YouTube.

In his vlog for March 20, 2020, Hank Green tells his brother – and his wider internet audience – about his experience in finding out that he has ulcerative colitis, an autoimmune disorder in which his body attacks the lining of his large intestine, causing severe pain, and potentially leading to other consequences, like the possibility that he might need to have his colon removed, or having a greater risk of cancer.

While his diagnosis of ulcerative colitis allowed for some clarity on next steps for his health care, it left many unknowns... he really didn't know what kind of consequences this illness would lead to – or when. Moreover, he began to realize that many of his expectations about his future – the story he told himself about his future – were now irrevocably changed.

Some of these expectations, he explains, were ones he wasn't even aware that he had, such as the expectation that he could eat popcorn whenever he wanted throughout his life. Popcorn is no longer an option for him, and without knowing that this was even something he expected, the option of popcorn was lost forever.

One way that Hank describes this is as “the sudden obliteration of expectation” and the emptiness that can follow when these expectations disappear, without something firmer to take their place, other than the knowledge that the future will never be the same.

In looking for a word that could signify this feeling, a friend of his suggested *wuthering*, which the author Emily Brontë describes as an “atmospheric tumult” in her novel *Wuthering Heights*. Hank Green suggests that the word *wuthering* could well be used more broadly to denote a sense of uncertainty – and, more specifically, the kind of uncertainty that comes with a realization that our previous expectations no longer seem realistic, and that things will never be the same again.

It may well be that Hank's use of *wuthering*, in this sense, will never gain currency in everyday language, but in exploring it as one way to describe that sense of loss and uncertainty, he reveals a very telling common experience in our humanity.

My friends, many of you are familiar with this feeling.

It might have come with the death of a loved one, or another kind of loss, like a breakup or someone moving away. It might come with the

loss of a job, or it might be part of a change in health, be it due to an accident, an illness, or aging.

These days, many of us are experiencing it together, as we figure out – in a global scale – what the current pandemic means... now and in the future. We expect that things *will* get better, but we don't really know when. And when they do, they will never be the same.

It can be hard to contemplate this new reality.

The story we've told ourselves about our future seems to vanish – at least for the time being – and we're realizing that we've had certain expectations from everyday life, which are now rare, such as buying groceries whenever we see fit, finding what we're looking for at the store, taking vacations, or traveling, or simply greeting each other with a handshake or a hug.

Things like sharing a common space in our church building, in the presence of our community of faith, are no longer part of our week – and we don't really know when that will be possible again. There are other people we'd hope to see in person, and it may now be that we won't see them for a long time. In some cases, we might never see them again.

These things are gone from our lives for the time being, and while most of these will return, we will not look at these parts of our lives in the same way again, knowing that they are much less certain than we've come to expect.

The absence of these things, and their eventual – yet precarious – return will become a new normal. In the meantime, we are also adjusting to the new normal of remote and virtual meetings, and connecting from afar with different methods and technologies. It is not the same, yet we are learning to adapt to these alternatives, and they are becoming increasingly normal.

My friends, together we are weathering the storm, the atmospheric tumult, of a collective wuthering. This new reality is becoming part of our story about our present and our future. This new story will shape our lives from now on, as our expectations shift and adjust toward a different sense of normalcy.

Not all of these new expectations will represent loss – we may in fact expect more and newer opportunities. We might expect more about preparedness for pandemics, and also for making our health care system more robust altogether. We might expect a deeper awareness of all who face economic uncertainty, in our communities nearby *and* around the world, not just now, but also at other times.

In our community, one of the new expectations may well be the possibility to reach more folks from our community, and in ways we haven't tried before. What we learn from this time will remain with us, and will become part of our new story.

My friends, our new stories will eventually help us fill the gap – the distance – that we might be feeling today. It will not be the same and it will be something new. We may, my friends, even find a deeper sense of connection and a previously hidden wholeness.

In Solidarity, so may it be.
Amen

Suggested hymns:

146 Soon the Day Will Arrive

Words: Ehud Manor

Music: Nurit Hirsh

(tune Bashanah)

151 I Wish I Knew How

Words & Music: Billy Taylor and Dick Dallas

~)-| arr. by Mary Allen Walden, 1946-1997, © 1992 UUA

(tune Mandela)

1021 Lean on Me

Words & Music: The late Bill Withers, 1938-2020 © 1972 Interior Music (BMI)