

Hold

Unitarian Universalist Church of Olinda

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3 May, 2020



I am not a financial advisor, but I've sat on the boards of several faith-based not-for profits, some of which hold endowment funds... and these are subject to stock market volatility.

And I've seen the question that inevitably comes up when there's a downturn in the market – what to do with the funds?

And the inevitable answer from financial advisors is very consistent and very concise – “Hold”.

Given the choice, they say, the best thing you can do is nothing. Don't sell, or sell as little as possible.

In some cases, they concede that there may be a need to convert a portion to extra cash reserves and service some immediate needs, but for the most part – just hold. The most effective thing you can do, most advisors maintain, is to do as little as possible.

Now each situation is different, and I must stress this again, *I* am not a financial advisor. But I *am* a spiritual leader, and I find it oddly comforting when such distinct disciplines can overlap on similarly simple, yet complexly counterintuitive insights.

For months now, I have occasionally invited us to sit in stillness during worship. And I do this as a practice in doing more by doing less. Being able to take a few moments to acknowledge ourselves, by recognizing the spirit of life that goes into every breath we take – and holding some

stillness, can sometimes be a more effective way of building self-awareness, than doing a lot of active self-actualization.

I also know that that is not always what works for all of you, and there are other ways to stay in touch with ourselves, singing, cooking, exercising, searching deep conversations with dear ones, playing, studying. These too can be forms of meditation, especially when done with a certain intentionality.

Perhaps one of the things that many of the practices that help build selfhood have in common, is that they invite one to affect what one can *actually* affect – nothing more.

And as we wrap up 7 weeks of enhanced physical distancing between us, the question of what we can affect can become especially sharp.

The last 7 weeks may have felt rather long – “March was a very long year” I have heard folks say. And April was a longer one.

And in this time, we are still left with uncertainty about what happens next. *Some* things seem like they’re being primed for opening – in a limited way. Other things, like in-person worship, seem likely to still take several weeks, or quite possibly... months.

Rather than a sprint, this race is looking more like a marathon, or perhaps a relay-race.

And amid this uncertainty, the most consistent and concise request has been... to hold. To hold on, just a while longer.

It is a counterintuitive ask, especially when there seems like there’s so much to do. And yet, we are being invited to follow the wisdom, that we may be able to do more for others, by doing less. Or at least, by doing less of what we might usually do outside.

And while indoors, it can be quite easy to find a preoccupation on how others are doing – and wondering if we’re doing quarantine right... or perhaps more often, wondering if others are doing quarantine better than us.

Pastor Charleen Jongejan Harder, from North Leamington United Mennonite Church, challenges this premise – “comparison is the thief of joy”, she proclaims in her *Covidevotional* reflection for April 28, 2020.

Now, she’s not talking about the kind of comparison that helps better understanding, like the “compare and contrast” that we do in an English Lit assignment. What Pastor Charleen is warning against is the comparison that gets easily paired with jealousy and envy, by which we unnecessarily measure ourselves against those around us, and instead of finding support or inspiration in them, we use their examples as reasons to undermine our own worth, and the value that we offer to others by being us, letting our inherent worth and dignity get obscured by an unhelpful focus on others’ ways of being themselves.

There is a video by the YouTube creator CGP Grey, called “Lockdown Productivity: Spaceship You”, and he offers another set of tools. A kind of homework – quite literally – to set our limited space in the most effective way, so that we may be ourselves, as much as possible, during this time. It does not require a lot of work – just mindful work.

Hold your sleeping space with reverence, sanctify some space for physical activity, celebrate your space and times of relaxation, and all of this is a creative enterprise that may in turn give you space to create when you need to.

At first glance, Pastor Charleen’s *Covidevotional* reflection, and CGP Grey’s advice may seem to be at odds with each other. Pastor Charleen seems to imply that we shouldn’t feel caught up in the pressures of competition and feel compelled to do something that we’re not up for, while CGP Grey talks about “Lockdown Productivity”.

Like many things, I find that both messages complement the other, offering slightly different dimensions to our shared situation. In essence, they both offer a common mission to be better to oneself and better as oneself. CGP Grey phrases it as a mission to come back better than before, while Pastor Charleen emphasizes that this mission need not be hampered by unnecessary comparisons to others – if there’s a race, it is *your* race... no one else’s.

As much as Grey talks about the mission of self-improvement, he never suggests improvement against anyone else, only one’s own ability to take care of oneself – both for the sake of one’s own wellbeing, as well as the possibility to contribute to the outside world... if not now, then at some point.

When speaking about acts of creation, Grey suggests these can be just about anything that you’re good at, or are interested in getting better at, or even something that you need to do to look after yourself. Cooking, crafting, studying, work – *if* that’s something you can do at home. Pastor Charleen would add minding your children or your family. Affect what you are able to affect – that’s all. The mission of being better than before, is yours – no one else’s.

Grey also acknowledges that there will be times when the mission flounders – that’s to be expected, and berating oneself about it is less helpful than looking to continue on the mission.

And I suspect the mission’s greatest value probably lies in its aspiration, rather than the specific result. As Pastor Charleen observes, “*The truth is, many of us are struggling, most of us won’t produce our best work in this season, and many of us will emerge in great need of healing.*” And still, with the mission in mind to keep us focused, we may avoid coming out worse off... or at least, having avoided the worse outcomes.

And, my friends, these options are more desirable than their alternatives – the lesson of the mission remains: affect what you can; there is little use in affecting what we cannot. Comparing ourselves to others, in the

company of jealousy and envy, leads to little growth. While a mission to keep mindful of ourselves, of our needs, of our reasonable actions, may well bring us to a deeper sense of meaning.

My friends, to hold on to what is good, we may let go of the extra work involved in seeking to do what we cannot. This is the counterintuitive wisdom of being more effective by doing less, when what we do, we do mindfully.

My friends, minding ourselves – being more mindful of ourselves – is far from being selfish... it is being *self-full*. It is a way of serving ourselves well so that we may sustainably be of better service to humanity. So that we may hold each other better, as we hold on for yet another while.

So may it be.
In Solidarity
Amen

Suggested hymns:

Opening Hymn #295 Sing Out Praises for the Journey

~)-| W: Mark M. DeWolfe, 1953-1988,
~)-| M: rev. by Joyce Painter Rice, © 1991 UUA
Music: Henry Purcell, 1659-1695
WESTMINSTER ABBEY 8.7.8.7.8.7.

Hymn #123 Spirit of Life

W & M: Carolyn McDade, 1935 © 1981 Carolyn McDade
~)-| harmony by Grace Lewis-McLaren, 1939- , © 1992 Unitarian Universalist Association
SPIRIT OF LIFE 8.12.8.12.8.10

Closing Hymn – #348 Guide My Feet

Words: Traditional
Music: Spiritual from the collection of Willis Laurence James, 1900-1966
harmony by Wendell Whalum, 1932-
GUIDE MY FEET Irregular