

TRUST, DOUBT, DESPAIR AND ACTION:
LESSONS FOR OUR TIME

OPENING WORDS

We live within the circle of humans. But we also live within the great circle of life that exists here on this planet – the circle of the twenty-four hours day, the circle of the seasons, the circle of each experience, and the circle of our lives from birth to death. Thus as we open our gathering this morning I invite us to honor the circle by calling in the powers of the East – the place of the sunrise, the place of Spring, the place of birth and new beginnings, the place of inspiration, and the home of Eagle. Then I call in the powers of the South – the place of midday, the place of Summer,, the place of childhood, the place of innocence and trust, and the home of little Mouse. Then I invite the powers of the West – the place of sunset, the place of Fall, the place of adolescence, the place of the darkness and looking within, and the home of Bear. Lastly, I invite North – the place of the night, the place of Winter, the place of adulthood, the place of the ancestors and those yet to be born, the place of bringing our gifts into community, and the home of Snowy Owl. May the circle of all life come to hold us in sacred time and place as we gather together.

LIGHTING THE CANDLE

I light this candle for all lost in the darkness. May it join with the light of the others to offer hope in the face of despair, courage in the face of fear, and love in the face of hate.

WORDS FOR REFLECTION

First they came for the communists, and I did not speak out because I was not a communist.
Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out because I was not a trade unionist.
Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out because I was not a Jew.
Then they came for me, and there was no one left to speak for me.

Pastor Martin Niemoller

SERMON

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Sometime in my young adulthood I had exhausted all the hiking trails that I could cover in one day so decided to learn how to backpack. I knew nothing about gear, packing for weight distribution, or hiking with a pack on my back so I signed up for a seven-day backpacking trip to southwestern Colorado with a well-known, nature-oriented organization.

At the assigned date and time we gather at the trailhead. After a meet and greet, we divide up the community equipment and stores, repack our packs, weigh them to be sure they are within limits, then hoist our packs and set out on the trail. I am excited about this adventure but somewhat nervous about my ability to do this.

Single file, we hike north into the San Juan Range. Quickly I learn that jumping from rock to rock to cross a small stream is more challenging with a 35# pack on my back! My mass is greater and my center of gravity is higher so once I jump I find the pack wants to keep on going forward while my body wants to stop! Yet during the day I learn to make necessary adjustments and begin to trust my ability to negotiate the trail hazards. I am quite pleased with myself. During the day I note that the two male leaders set a reasonable pace and seem both friendly and knowledgeable.

I want to pause here and begin to talk about trust.

We learn through our experience. Most of us learn to trust or not trust through trial and error by risking a little vulnerability in the world and waiting and watching to see how the world responds. If received and respected, I may risk more vulnerability and hopefully grow more trust. If, on the other hand, I am disrespected, hurt, or put at risk, I withdraw my trust and faith in that person. One mark of maturity is the ability to build trusting relationships, to end relationships that are not healthy, while at the same time building a healthy trust in oneself, one's own knowing.

On this trip I am learning to trust my growing skills in backpacking and I am watching and listening as it regards the two leaders. Can I trust them? Now to return to the story-

In late afternoon the trail makes an abrupt turn and we are at a river crossing. There is no bridge. The water is moving high and fast with mid-summer's snow melt. The leaders collaborate as we stand around. Faced with the challenge of safely crossing, they devise the following system: A climbing rope is tied around a big tree trunk on the bank on which we stand; then one leader with remaining rope in hand wades across the river; arriving at the far shore, he pulls the rope tight and anchors it around a tree trunk. We are then instructed to ford the river in the following manner: "Take off your boots, tie them together, and put them around your neck; unbuckle your backpack belt so that you can shuck your pack if you fall (if you cannot get out of your pack, it will act as an anchor and you will drown); cross the river one at a time holding onto the rope with your upstream hand." I must admit that I am scared and when I get scared, I also get mad. I am thinking to myself that there must be an easier and safer way to cross the river. My turn to cross arrives. Barefooted, I gingerly step down the bank and into an icy cold torrent. Its power frightens and its frigidness surprises. My right hand clutches onto the rope which is anything but stable as my hand jerks up and down to help me keep my balance but the rope is my only lifeline. My feet slip over wet and slimy rocks that I cannot see. The water rushes around my knees and thighs. Minutes later I arrive at the far shore certain that my feet will emerge from the water bruised and bloody but they are simply white with cold. We all cross safely but for me the seeds of doubt are planted.

I want to pause here and continue my talk about trust:

As we build connections and relationships in the world, we are watching, listening, and evaluating whether this is a good connection – one that can be trusted. The challenge is to pay attention to the feedback but to do this, we must have a certain level of trust in oneself and we must also be clear about our own intentions. Sometimes ego wants something for itself and from the other – protection, attention, power, caretaking among them – and then our ego helps us to ignore other signs that indicate danger. Here after the river crossing, I am discomfited by how the leaders handled this challenge but I want to do this trip so I put doubt "on hold" and decide to watch and evaluate. Back to the story!

The next morning we hike more deeply into the wilderness and begin to climb. Today's destination is a base camp beyond a twelve thousand foot pass. I find a rhythm. My pack no longer feels like I am piggy-backing a stranger but has become part of me. We begin our ascent to the pass. There is no discernable trail and rather than switch backing so as to conserve energy, the leaders take us straight up. As we near the summit, a storm approaches. I can feel the change in the air, the electricity building. One of the leaders announces, "The electricity is building. If lightning cracks, stand on your right leg so that the charge will pass through the right side of your body and miss your heart." This is just plain dumb! Now I know that I and the rest of us are in trouble following these two leaders! All I want to do is get to the pass, begin my descent to base camp, and figure out what to do.

Pause again.

When doubt is confirmed, what choices do I have?

- 1. I can fall into despair and powerlessness. I can deny that anything is awry. This approach is useful if I am fearful of authority figures, fearful of challenging, or hesitant in taking individual responsibility.*

2. *I can react by withdrawing and shutting down. In other words I can opt out. Opting out solves little but it does rob others of the gifts that I may bring forward in solving the problems that are at hand. One further thought, if I opt out I can complain and blame but I wonder who will come when the knock comes at my door?*
3. *I can take responsibility for myself, act responsibly towards others, and join with others.*

Back to the story.

It is the next morning in base camp and I am in a sour mood. The plan is to climb a nearby 14,000 foot peak that day and then return to base camp. I opt out and spend much of the day in my tent staying out of the rain that has settled in. A few others remain in camp as well. In late afternoon the climbing party returns and several are disgruntled. In talking with them I learn that the leaders abandoned the group on a false peak in the midst of a thunderstorm and went on to summit the 14,000 foot peak. What becomes crystal clear to me is that these two leaders are on an ego trip. They offered this backpacking experience through this organization so that they could have a free trip to this area so as to bag 14,000 foot peaks! They are leaders in name only while their actions put all of us at risk.

I know I can no longer put my trust in these two men and must leave but I am hesitant to leave alone for on the way out, there is the river to ford. I quietly begin to seek another unhappy group member and find one in the being of a Southern Baptist minister from Alabama. Before dinner we make a plan to leave the next morning and to hike out in one day what we, as a group, had covered in two days. We agree to talk to the leaders after dinner. The leaders are unhappy and try to dissuade us from leaving but we are clear in our intentions and know there is nothing they can do to stop us. We agree to sign a paper releasing them from responsibility if something befalls us and we also agree to not tell anyone else until the morning.

Let's pause this story for one last time.

Here I want to expand upon the option of taking responsibility and joining with others. What does this ask of me and you?

1. *First, it means learning to trust oneself – trusting one's own knowing and one's intuition about what is right for the self. That requires courage and daring.*
2. *Second, a mark of maturity is our willingness to bring our individual skills and talents into community, to not hang back and let others do. This, too, takes courage and daring. It requires trusting oneself regardless of others' judgments.*
3. *Third, we live in community. Influence and power come when we join with others. This, too, requires courage and daring for we must be willing to stand our ground, to learn how to speak, listen and respond with respect. We must be willing to make space for differences, to build coalitions, and to act together.*

To return to the story one last time.

At breakfast the next morning, we tell the group that we are leaving. As we make last minute preparations, several come to us expressing displeasure with the leaders and wishing they had known earlier of our plans so that they could have joined us. Regardless, my partner and I take our leave and head out. Much of the hike remains a blur to me except for the river crossing. We make a plan long before we reach the river. We each decide to not cross the river barefooted. We cross together holding our inside hands and alternate one being stationary as the other moves forward and then reversing roles. We cross in minutes and happily move on to our waiting cars.

So in looking back at this experience, what lessons can we bring forward to today for, after all, this story is a microcosm of the macrocosm.

1. *Trust is extended to others not with blind faith but with a detached awareness, a wait-and-see attitude.*
2. *Trust is also an attribute developed within the self and reflects our ability and willingness to hold ego in check, to keep ourselves physically and emotionally safe, and to hold to our moral compass.*
3. *Doubt is our early warning system alerting us to Danger. We dismiss it at peril. It tells us to takeoff the blinders, to assess the situation with clarity, and to begin to discern choices.*
4. *Despair, though often a common response, is not an answer for it cripples us with hopelessness and powerlessness.*
5. *Silence is not an answer either for it implies agreement and further erodes any sense of self.*
6. *Action moves us. Action, not from a reactive heart contributing further to polarities; but action from a durable heart – a heart fully trusting in oneself, risking vulnerability, risking listening, responding, and acting.*
7. *Community is essential. Joining with others with durable hearts is what community is all about. If I regret anything in this story, it is my immaturity relative to community. With older and wiser eyes I can see how understanding and valuing community would have helped me to speak up, to help air the issues many of us shared, and to come to some community resolution. But I was young and immature and it took great courage and daring for me to act as I did, to go against the grain, to go against leaders.*

In closing I would say that it is not always easy to remember that each of us is a source, each of us is a creator, and each of us is a light in the world capable of joining with the light of others. But remember we must, for it is all that we have.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

I would like to weave three quotes as a way to close this morning's service.

First: Tyranny does not begin with violence; it begins with the first gesture of collaboration. Its most enduring crime is drawing decent men and women into its siege of the truth. Evan Osnos

Silence, despair, and fear imply collaboration and are very present dangers.

Second: The meaning of life is to find your gift. The purpose if life is to give it away. Anon.

My vision is that we are all on the same train though we may be in different cars reflecting our different vibrational levels. But each person is a light, regardless of the car he/she is in. We need the light of each and every person. What is your light, your gift that we all need to dispel silence, despair, and fear?

Third: Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has. Margaret Mead

How will you join community with the light of your durable heart to dispel the threats of tyranny? Trust your light and share it with others.

My we all go forward honoring the courage and daring of our durable hearts. The Circle is closed. Go in Peace.