

“The Next Right Thing”

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I've been thinking about how the rings in trees hold evidence of the fires they've lived through, a black line amidst their rings of time and age. I've been thinking about how this pandemic will leave a mark in all of our lives, a ring of ash telling of the time of sickness. This is a time that will change us, one that already has.

As the activist Sonya Renee Taylor writes, “We will never go back to normal. Normal never was. Our pre-corona existence was not normal other than we normalized greed, inequity, exhaustion, depletion, extraction, disconnection, confusion, rage, hoarding, hate and lack. We should not long to return, my friends. We are being given the opportunity to stitch a new garment. One that fits all of humanity and nature.” end quote.

We should not long to return. We must return, instead, to the place within ourselves that knows of justice, kindness, and humility, and then do the next right thing. In a world of exhaustion and depletion, maybe the next right thing is a nap. Or maybe it's an online petition and a donation to a charity. Maybe it's watching the Saturday Night Live parody of Frozen 2 because you just need to laugh. Wandering through this wilderness, hoping for a new world, for a time after all this sickness, it's hard and has meant shifting so much of how we live.

My nephew called this week - he's four and master of the comedic side-eye and impish grin. He is, appropriately, named Isaac, which means the one who laughs. He wanted to know if he could come over to my house, because he's sick of being cooped up at home. He was prepared to negotiate and promised he wouldn't share his germs. He sort of understands what's happening. But he also seems to think "The Big Sickness," as they call it at my sister's house, has something to do with his mom being seven months pregnant. It is, after all, a confusing time for all of us, let alone if you're four years old. I wonder what sense he'll make of this when he's older, how this moment will affect the world he grows up in.

I asked Isaac how he was planning on getting here, reminding him that he has to take an airplane to get from his house in Minnesota to my house in Massachusetts. He said he would go to the airport, still making those eyes like he knew the whole conversation was a farce. We told him that all the pilots are home staying safe from the big sickness and the airplanes are grounded. Isaac, being Isaac, shrugged with a twinkle in his eye and responded, "is okay. I build one." Master of deadpan that one.

His final suggestion was that they take his mom's car and drive here, before the whole conversation devolved into giggles. I must say, I was impressed by his resourcefulness in imagining a travel plan under these strange circumstances, and moreover by his amusement at the challenge.

We're all doing this in so many aspects of our lives right now. As normal avenues are closed, we change course, adjust, and find our way. For some of us life remains similar, maybe better in ways - more time at

home, less time commuting. And yet for others everything has been upended - jobs lost, loved ones sick and dying, the danger of being an essential worker, the loss of normalcy of any kind. But no matter the impact on our immediate lives, there remains the overarching magnitude. The Big Sickness, the ring of ash marking this time in our collective living. There's a heaviness to it all, so much fear, so much injustice.

We should not long to return to the world as it was before. But the wilderness is daunting, the task is beyond imagining. How do we build a world of goodness, of balance, of equity when that is a world we have never fully known?

As Martha Postlewaite wrote in our call to worship:

Do not try to save the whole world or do anything grandiose.

Instead, create a clearing in the dense forest of your life and wait there patiently, until the song that is your life falls into your own cupped hands and you recognize and greet it.

Only then will you know
how to give yourself
to this world
so worthy of rescue.

We should not long to return to the world as it was before.

A few weeks ago my sister recommended I watch Frozen 2. She said it felt strangely appropriate for life right now and gave me her Disney plus login.

Though the plot is admittedly a bit odd and the visuals often resemble music videos from the 1980s, there was something profound in the message.

When things are too big and too scary and too hard, all you have to do is the next right thing.

In Elsa's case the next right thing involves learning to harness her power so she can uncover the injustice at the root of their society and build a world of mutual flourishing. Which does feel strangely appropriate for life right now. With more magical ice horses and comedic snowmen.

When normal channels close and the way forward seems unfathomable, you just do the next right thing. And that means returning to our vision of what matters most, by settling in to our mutual humanness and remembering what is essential.

We will find our way, just as the Israelites find their way through the desert - a journey comprised of a million steps, of doubt and vision mingled with dust.

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In our last Reflections podcast, Amanda closed by asking me what gives me hope right now.

My hope is that this time will change us, that in remembering how connected we all are, we will build a different world. For our children, for each other, for the whole of creation.

Because I'm not convinced that we want to go back to the way things were before the big sickness, before the ring of ash. I don't think going back is even possible at this point. Which is daunting, exhausting, but it's also liberating. And it's something we will all do together, one step at a time.

May it be so.

Amen.