FEAR ITSELF
Reading & reflections from Joyce Jooley-Gingrich & Rev. Mark Ward, Lead Minister
Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Asheville
September 6. 2020

READING

Autobiography in Five Short Chapters by Portia Nelson

Chapter 1
I walk down the street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I fall in.
I am lost ... I am helpless.
It isn't my fault.
It takes forever to find a way out.

Chapter 2
I walk down the same street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I pretend I don't see it.
I fall in again.
I can't believe I am in the same place.
But it isn't my fault.
It still takes a long time to get out.

Chapter 3
I walk down the same street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I see it is there.
I still fall in ... it's a habit.
My eyes are open.
I know where I am.
It is my fault.
I get out immediately.

Chapter 4
I walk down the same street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I walk around it.

Chapter 5
I walk down another street.

Reflection on a quote from Eleanor Roosevelt for UU Sunday Service Sept 6, 2020
By Joyce Hooley

"*You gain strength, courage, confidence, with every experience in which you stop to look fear in the face. You must do the thing you think you cannot*."

These words from Eleanor Roosevelt, confront me every morning, because they are written on an index card which has been lodged under the glass top of my writing desk for many years. Why? I will tell you in a minute, but first let's consider Eleanor and her context…

Eleanor Roosevelt became First Lady in 1933, in the midst of the Great Depression. At that time, the US may not have been suffering an epidemic of a deadly and highly contagious viral illness as we are today, but it was suffering, as we are presently, an epidemic of poverty and racism. We know that as First Lady, Eleanor traveled throughout the country, witnessing first-hand the devastation that the Depression brought to poor Americans, and that she shared what she learned with President Roosevelt, impressing upon him the need for the New Deal Programs. She became a leading advocate not only for the poor people of our nation, but also for the disenfranchised, lending her voice to demands for the equal involvement of women in political power, and to the cause of civil rights through her speeches on the radio, her daily column for the newspapers, her weekly press conferences -exclusively for female reporters, and through the many newsreels in which she appeared. She joined the NAACP, campaigned to end poll taxes, raised money for Howard University, and sought to make New Deal programs address the needs of Black Americans. In 1939, when the DAR refused to allow Marian Anderson to sing in their concert hall, First Lady Roosevelt withdrew her membership in protest. She then supported Ms. Anderson's concert on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, which was attended by 75,000 people, and invited Ms. Anderson to sing at the White House for the King and Queen of England. In a lesser known incident, she made a pointed protest against segregation laws. At the Southern Conference for Human Welfare in Alabama in 1938, she placed her chair in the aisle, exactly between the "whites-only" and "colored-only" sections and sat there throughout the entire conference.

With her highly visible support of these social causes, First Lady Roosevelt earned the ire of many conservatives. They attacked her viciously, not only for her critique of contemporary race relations and her support for civil rights, but for her refusal to adhere to traditional female roles.

And what was her response? She observed that "A woman is like a teabag. You never know how strong she is until she is in hot water."

All of this from a woman who, in her autobiography, described her childhood self as pathologically shy. As a girl, she knew that her family, particularly her mother, thought of her as an 'ugly duckling" and this discouraged her from being outgoing and confident. Later as a young woman, according to Susan Cain who writes about introverts, "When Eleanor married FDR, she lived in the home of, and under the thumb of, her domineering mother-in-law who strongly discouraged her from speaking up about anything, ever."

And yet, as an adult, Eleanor Roosevelt became an outspoken public figure in her own right, a political activist, and a champion of progressive social causes. After her tenure as First Lady, she was appointed to be the US Delegate to the UN General Assembly, where she chaired

the Commission on Human Rights, and in 1948 won the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

So, what was this once shy girl, this life-long introvert, referring to when she wrote that we must look fear in the face?

She was not referring to the fear that a meat packer might have of a potentially deadly virus in her workplace, or the fear of "La Migra" held by an undocumented worker who escaped gang violence in Guatemala, or the fear of the police that a young black man in America is forced to live with, or the fear of becoming homeless that a single mother who has lost her job suddenly knows.

Rather, she was speaking of the kind of fears that prevent us from realizing our capacity to be of service: the fear of failure, the fear of shame, the fear of looking foolish, the fear of public ridicule, the fear of not being skilled enough. This is the kind of fear that she counseled we must look in the face. We must not let these kinds of fears stop us from developing our capacities to be of service. More broadly, we must not let fear keep us from challenging ourselves to grow, to develop, to learn new skills, to change, to be changed. This is what she was thinking of when she counseled, "You gain strength, courage, confidence, with every experience in which you stop to look fear in the face. You must do the thing you think you cannot."

That quotation has lived under the glass top of my writing desk for almost thirty years, because I needed it as a pediatric resident working in pediatric intensive care units. I hated intensive care. Already a parent myself by then, (my son was three when I started residency,) it was too easy for me to imagine myself in the shoes of the parents of my patients. I felt keenly the wild horror of every mother who stood over her unconscious child's bedside gripping the bedrails. Even though the work of my pediatric team often resulted in happy triumphs, there were many times when we could not repair the damage that had been done in a single day by rampantly invasive bacteria, or in a split second by a car accident. I was always aware that any error on my part could further complicate an illness, or even cause a child's death. I carried around fear and dread during the entire month of every one of my PICU rotations. I never really got over that fear, I just learned to live with it, to push it aside and do what had to be done.

Eleanor Roosevelt's counsel can, I think, be useful to us as a nation, especially in this time so laden with fear. We must not allow those who peddle fear to prevail. It will take courage to uphold a vision of our country that values "The Common Good." We have disgracefully high levels of child poverty that decades of unbridled and unregulated capitalism have created; we have appalling police brutality and mass incarceration of Black Americans which centuries of racist policies have fostered; we have an unaffordable system of healthcare insurance tied to employment and based in private for-profit companies, the list goes on…. It will take courage to tackle our persistent social problems with our own "New Deal." "We must do the things we think we cannot."

And her counsel can be useful to us as a congregation as well. We must not let fear of our own inadequacies keep us from moving out of our comfort zones, from learning new ways of serving our wider community and each other. We must be willing to be stretched, to be challenged. It might mean something as simple as learning to Zoom in order to be present to each other, or as difficult as exploring our own participation in racism, our own assumptions of

privilege, in order to better embody the diverse and welcoming community we want to be. "We must do the things we think we cannot."

Reflections from Rev. Mark Ward

It was a grey, chilly day in Washington, March 4, 1933, with flags flying and bands playing. But the mood was anything but gala when the newly elected president, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, took the oath of office.

One out of four Americans was out of work, the banking system had shut down, factories were closed, families lived in tar-paper shacks, scavenging for food. It was as desperate a moment as America had ever known.

Roosevelt began his speech telling the crowd that he wouldn't peddle false optimism, that he would, as he said, "speak the truth, the whole truth, frankly and boldly." And the most important truth, he said, is that "this great nation will endure as it has endured, will revive and prosper." We have it in us, he insisted, to succeed.

"The only thing we have to fear," he said, "is fear itself – nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed effort to convert retreat into advance." 87 years later when we think of that speech, those are the words that come to mind, brave words that set the tone for the most activist presidency in our history.

They have a special resonance this year as we approach Labor Day, itself now 126 years old, a federal holiday that celebrates the dignity of work, when unemployment has climbed to levels not seen since the Depression of the '30s. And fear, once again, is in the middle of things. But this time, it has a new tenor, and unlike in Roosevelt's time it is our own government that is leading the chorus.

Be afraid, we are told, of state and city leaders who seek to protect the health of their constituents by closing schools, bars, stadiums and any other activity that mixes people freely without protection against the spread of disease. Be afraid of black and brown people and their allies who protest the heavy hand of white supremacy and growing numbers of wrongful killings. Be afraid of shadowy, unnamed others with vague ill intent. Be afraid, and abandon your trust in our democratic process.

Returning to Roosevelt's speech, I was struck by how far the ethos we are living in today has strayed from the vision that he offered. "Our distress," he said at the time, "comes from no failure of substance. We are stricken by no plaque of locusts." While the COVID virus dogs us, it, too, is no "plague of locusts." It is a disease we are capable of understanding and guarding against, as other nations have shown. But too many have simply chosen not to: not to mask, not to distance, not to quarantine. And too often leaders are too feckless to insist on it.

Our substance is plain in the commitment of first responders, medical workers and others who echo Roosevelt's words that, "These dark days will be worth all they cost us if they teach us that our destiny is not to be ministered unto but to minister to ourselves and our fellows." Unlike those who read the nation's health in the financial markets, Roosevelt insisted that we recognize "the falsity of material wealth as the standard of success."

And this, he said, "goes hand in hand with the abandonment of the false belief that public office and high political position are to valued only by the pride of place and personal profit." Instead, he said, "we now realize as we have never realized before our interdependence on each other; that we cannot merely take but must give as well; that if we are to go forward, we must . . . be willing to work for the good of a common discipline."

Then, such words were considered inspiring oratory to motivate people to work together. Today, even the notion of a "common discipline" seems alien to our leaders. With the disparity of wealth gaping wide and the growth of the economy limited to that thin sliver of people invested in the financial markets, it's hard to name any discipline that elevates more than a wealthy few.

In a recent TED talk, the philosopher Michael Sandel, argued that what we see operating here is a narrow meritocracy that is polarizing our people: the idea that success is a symptom of merit, and that those who struggle have only themselves to blame. But we know that to be a lie. Luck and good fortune play a big role in anyone's success. Even more, law and the economy are skewed to reward the wealthy, and deeply ingrained prejudice shuts out unfavored classes, especially black and brown people.

This system, Sandel points out, breeds hubris among winners, who think they are just getting their due, and humiliation among losers, who feel they were never given a fair chance. And all of it, slowly eats away at any hope of promoting what Roosevelt called a "common discipline" to work for the good of all.

Instead, it, too, makes us fearful: for those who are struggling, fear that they will fall further behind, for those getting by and even those who are well off fear of losing what they have. It breaks the bonds that build community.

Especially in these pandemic days, it leads us to see dangers in the dark, sequestered in our homes, out of touch even with those we love, no less the beautifully diverse array of people of all ages, genders, and ethnicities who occupy those spaces that we no longer encounter even with our imaginations.

If ever we were in need of a leader, who, as Franklin Roosevelt put it, would "speak the truth, the whole truth, frankly and boldly," it is now. And the truth is as simple as this: We need each other. No one is dispensable, and no one is owed greater duty than any other. We have no choice but to realize our interdependence on each other.

We cannot merely take, but we must give as well.
If you will show me compassion, then I may learn to care as you do. If you will show me acceptance, then I may learn to give as you do. If you will show me commitment, then I may learn to love as you do. And in time we may all learn to love, beyond families and loved ones, beyond race and country, beyond all that divides us.

We Americans seem to be cursed to having to forever relearn our nation's hardest lessons. At a time of bitter losses and despair Roosevelt pointed us toward a new vision: A nation that saw its duty in raising up its people so that each had the opportunity to make a life of dignity. The reforms he enacted – from the Social Security program to banking reforms – laid the groundwork for a half-century of prosperity.

But once again we stumbled over that hole in the road: privilege, racism, inequity and ever since we have been struggling to find a way out. We have tried denial, bluster, obliviousness, but they haven't gotten us anywhere.

Perhaps on Labor Day, where we celebrate the capacity of each person to put their skill, their brawn, their genius to work to service of humankind we may be ready, finally, to walk down another street.