

Sacred Conversations (cont.)
November 20, 2022
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North Universalist Chapel Society

Good morning and good Sunday. I hope that this new day finds you well. Today is Sunday, November the 20th and the title of this reflection Sacred Conversations (cont.).

Sometimes, we just don't realize how much weigh we're actually carrying...in hand bag or in suitcases, in pushcarts and in wheelbarrows. Sometimes, it's like there are invisible backpacks that we don't even know that we're carrying, backpacks that get so filled up and so terribly weighted down and backpacks that get so heavy with all of the things we need these days...that get so burdensome because of all of the things we really need...and it gets so heavy with the things that we think that we need that we actually don't need at all. And, get this, the kicker is—and I want to sensitive, I what to be mindful of those who are actually having this experience (I don't want to speak for them but I do want to publically voice what has been behaving like a private concern). The kicker in all of this is that some of us don't even know that we are carrying burdensome, heavy, invisible backpacks on our shoulders. Hold on... [adjust] It's a little bit funny, right? It's almost some of don't even realize the gravity of it all, behaving as if, when we ignore the gravity, the gravity goes away...and we can defy it...like we can somehow resist.

Apparently, none of us can really see our own invisible backpacks. We can only really see the invisible backpacks of other people. Of course, I don't really know. I can't speak about this first-hand. I can't speak from experience. I don't have direct knowledge myself because I'm one of the lucky ones. I don't carry an invisibly burdensome backpack. As you can clearly see, I'm free. This is because I have an intentional practice that allows me to escape such things, such heavy things that weigh others down. Hold on... [adjust] I know. It's a little bit crazy, isn't it?

I want to stay with that analogy for a moment. I want to stay with the metaphor...because it's really important for lucky people like me (maybe like you as well)...it's really important for those of us who do not carry heavy backpacks to stand in solidarity with the people who do. And furthermore (and this is the part that's almost unbelievable), we have to stay super-compassionate, we must remain tender, kind and even empathetic because most of the people who shoulder all of that weight in their invisible backpack [mock whisper] don't even know they're carrying them. [normal voice] They don't even know they're carrying around all of that baggage day after day. Some people! Wait... Hold on... [adjust] it's a little bit funny?

The last thing I'll say on this is that is super sensitive and challenging is that the things we deeply need AND the things that we really don't really need at all weigh down the people that carry these burdensome backpacks more or less the same. If you are one of those people who isn't free from the terrible burdens of the world of these days, if you're feeling weak or overly tired and you just can't

imagine why, you might be carrying around one of those invisible burdensome backpacks. If that's you, if I'm describing your experience, call me on my cell. The number is printed in the Order of Service...and don't be embarrassed if this is happening to you. It could happen to any of us. Hold on... [adjust] Take it from me. I know.

When life presents its little challenges, we shoulder them at first. In the short term, this works out fine. The challenge is overcome. The problem is resolved or it goes away. We benefit from shouldering it, from carrying the weight because our lives return to normal in a timely fashion. We get over whatever issue it is without losing a step.

When life presents its challenges and these challenges go on for a while, what we shoulder at first and take on slowly begins affect our posture. The invisible backpack becomes heavier and heavier over time and we resent it. The heavy pack starts to injure our bodies, even if we have that strap—the one that all the backpacks have these days—that lets you displace some of the weight to shoulders. Do you know what I mean? Hold on... [adjust the strap]

Once again, I am not speaking from my own experience. As you can see, I am not wearing an invisible backpack. I am free.

Player One: Leon?

Leon: Yes.

Player One: I want to say this gently. You are carrying a backpack on your shoulders right now.

Leon: Hmm... Oh, I get it. [laughs] That's a little bit funny but incorrect. I have an intentional practice that allows me to escape such things.

Where was I? Ahh, yes.

When life presents its challenges and these challenges go on for a while, the invisible backpacks that SOME people carry unwittingly become heavier and heavier and we may not realize it. We may just accept the weight unconsciously and we may think that the weight is normal...because carrying such a weight has become the norm for most of us—[to Player One] NOT me. Thank you. [to all] Most of us do carry the weight and few of us know that we are doing so.

Ric Masten wrote a poem that I love. It doesn't fit here but I will share it with you anyway. It's short. It's called The Homesick Snail. He writes,

The homesick snail
goes slithering down his silver track
looking for the very thing
he carries on his back

It sort of fits...because the homesick snail is unaware of what he is carrying. It doesn't fit entirely though...because the snail longer for what he's carrying. And that's the energy of it. That's the whole tragedy of it, the odyssey of it...the fruitless and endless search for that which is right here in our hands...

[remove the backpack]

No one of us can clearly see all of the weight that we are carrying. But when you trust someone enough, when you love someone enough, whatever that person is carrying is fairly visible. It's not always obvious but it's noticeable. It's ridiculous sometimes because it can be so heavy...and because we are strong...and because we're so stoic—we, the rugged individualists—and because we're so proud, we will pretend that the burden is light or, even better, we pretend that the heavy burden isn't even there.

I have a colleague in Framingham named Aaron Stockwell. He's pretty awesome. He has a great ear and a great mind for poetry. Last time I saw him, he shared a poem with me called IT'S THE SEASON I OFTEN MISTAKE by Ada Limón. I believe that this poem is a reading poem...as opposed to a speaking one. So, I will recite it as if the title of the poem were actually the first line...so we can experience it as one's eye would see it on the page. []

It's the season I often mistake
Birds for leaves, and leaves for birds.
The tawny yellow mulberry leaves
are always goldfinches tumbling
across the lawn like extreme elation.
The last of the maroon crabapple
ovates are song sparrows that tremble
all at once. And today, just when I
could not stand myself any longer,
a group of field sparrows, that were
actually field sparrows, flew up into
the bare branches of the hackberry
and I almost collapsed: leaves
reattaching themselves to the tree
like a strong spell for reversal. What
else did I expect? What good
is accuracy amidst the perpetual
scattering that unspools the world.

I didn't know what "ovates" were. I had to look up the word. An ovate is "a member of an order of Welsh bards recognized at an Eisteddfod." The etymology suggests that they are soothsayers, able to foretell the future. Then, I didn't know what an "Eisteddfod" was. So, I had to look up that word, too. I learned that an Eisteddfod is "a competitive festival of music and poetry in Wales. Then, I had to read the poem again once I had everything defined and sussed out.

It's the season I often mistake
Birds for leaves, and leaves for birds.
The tawny yellow mulberry leaves
are always goldfinches tumbling
across the lawn like extreme elation.
The last of the maroon crabapple
[bards] are song sparrows that tremble

all at once. And today, just when I could not stand myself any longer, a group of field sparrows, that were actually field sparrows, flew up into the bare branches of the hackberry and I almost collapsed: leaves reattaching themselves to the tree like a strong spell for reversal. What else did I expect? What good is accuracy amidst the perpetual scattering that unspools the world.

And I have been unspooled and we have been unspooled amidst this shattering, viral catastrophe that has stolen our breathing and stolen smile-faces and stolen our laughter and muffled our song and stolen even TIME from the last two years.

When we first began this journey together and profoundly apart from one another, I would bring my guitar with me to preach in this very room, in this incredibly empty room. I needed another life force to keep me company because I felt to incredibly alone and so scared and so sad and I was afraid to show it. I was angry that COVID-19 became so politicized. I was far more angry than I dared express from this free pulpit. And, I promised you, as far as I am aware, I regret that choice not at all. I chose not to lead with my anxiety. Every minister within my circle chose the same thing...and we're all exhausted because we changed away from who we were. We had to change away from who we were...because who we were simply did not exist anymore.

So, I made a deal with the God I recognize. I said, "Holy One," humbly, just as my teacher taught me to do. I said,

Holy One, I am terrified and I love these people so very much. Thank you for all you've done for me. It's March now. March of 2020. Guide me through until Christmas and I will take it from there.

Then, Christmas came and we were doing ok. That's when I got anxious. Actually, that's when I first admitted to myself that I was anxious. That was when things started getting heavy, when my denial started wearing off...when the novelty of resistance wore thin and wore out...when the numbers kept climbing into the hundreds of thousands nationally and into the millions worldwide. Now, we're at 1.1 million deaths nationally and 6.62 million worldwide. 638 million cases.

Last Sunday morning, we asked "What conversations can change the world?" and we talked about ancient Archimedes. He said, "Give me a place to stand and a lever long enough, and I will move the world."

This Sunday morning, we enter in. We engage with one another about what matters. We might not change the world but we just might change ourselves. Can we go there lightly? Can we shed the heavy packs we carry and put the spring back in our step...even as the winter is fast approaching? Can we fall gently, like new snow, upon the rooftops of the world and melt and slide and curl and freeze in

spectacular and beautiful ways? Can we ride the waves in style? As they turn us upside down, can we hang negative 10 like snowboard surfers?

What are your feelings about the pandemic? How do you feel about wearing masks. As a community, we aren't ready to make changes immediately—not with the holidays coming and all—but the world is changed beneath our feet. How are we adjusting? How are we adjusting to the burdens that we carry (sometimes, without knowing it)? How is it that we are dealing with baggage that weighs us down?