

Falling Apart as a Spiritual Exercise

November 8 2020

Bellingham Unitarian Fellowship

Rev Paul Beckel

Gathering Music Audio/video montage of BUF choir trip to Romania in 2017

Welcome

Good morning and welcome to Bellingham Unitarian Fellowship. I'm Rev Paul Beckel. "This is the day the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it." A liberal Christian minister I knew many years ago began every Sunday service – for decades—with this invocation. "This is the day the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it." It was an invocation—to what? Mindless bliss? No. Denial of reality? No. Gratitude, probably. Grace. And Courage.

Bob must have shared this prayer on all kinds of Sundays. On the Sunday in 1981 following Ronald Reagan's nomination of Sandra Day O'Connor, the first woman to serve on the U.S. Supreme Court. And in 1985, the week that the Centers for Disease control issued guidelines for screening the nation's blood supply for the HIV virus. And again on the Sunday in 1990, when, after 27 years, Nelson Mandela was released from jail. On that Sunday in 1997 following the announcement of the birth of "Dolly," the first cloned sheep. On the Sunday after 9-11.

Days of beauty and days of horror, and *everything* in between. Some of us lived through all of these national and international ups and downs, and many more. For some of us, every one of these events happened *before* we were born, but we recognize that their echoes continue into *this* very day that we now share.

Young or old, we've all lived through days when, even tho the headlines were terrifying, children were being born who would bring joy and hope into our lives. We may have lived thru days when we got exciting new jobs that we came to hate. And days when it seemed as tho the Seahawks had made an asinine player trade ... but it turned out that they got a superstar.

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My heart, today—I don't know how to describe it. I'd say it's *heavy*, but I don't want you to think that that's *a metaphor* for overwhelming sorrow. I'd say that my heart *aches*, but I don't want you to think that that's *a metaphor* for grief. I might say that my heart is full, but again you might get the wrong idea. Because, yes, metaphorically, my heart is *full to bursting* with delight ... and disappointment, and anticipation, and uncertainty.

But metaphors aside, I mean, physically, my heart *aches*, and feels *heavy*, and feels, *physically*, like it's going to burst. You needn't be alarmed. I am fully confident that that muscle in here, the size and shape of a fist, is going to go on beating as it should. But anyone who's ever doubted that *emotions* have physical reverberations must have been on some other planet in 2020.

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So this is a day of hurting and healing. For the sake of alliteration, I would like to say hurting and healing and HONoring the resilience of our Unitarian kinfolk in Romania, who we'll hear more about over the next HOWur.

Healing is our theme for the whole month of November. Today, specifically, we'll explore together the paradox, and the promise, of what is often a first step in healing, which I'll refer to as, "falling apart as a spiritual exercise."

Prelude Hope is the Thing with Feathers

Chalice Lighting

There is no chance that we will fall apart
There is no chance
There are no parts
—June Jordan

Hymn *Szekely Aldas* (sung in English and Hungarian)
George Bor teaches Hungarian lyrics
Matt Novak & Allegra Ziffle guitar & violin accompaniment

Introduction Rod Haynes

For the late poet June Jordan, falling apart is impossible. She writes:

There is no chance that we will fall apart
There is no chance
There are no parts

Jordan suggests we are one with living *and* with death, the ying and the yang, the circle of life, light and darkness, hope and despair. Somewhere it is written that opposite forces rely on each other to co-exist; one cannot stand without the other. If you accept this, falling apart is as inevitable as coming together; that is, falling apart and coming together are a self-perpetuating, recurring whole. We prefer the latter and disdain the former, but this duality is, unavoidably, our package deal with life. Put more crudely, shit unavoidably happens, deal with it. Death's presence inspires the gathering of loved ones still living, to carry forward the memory of the departed. And the endless circle of living springs forward again.

It is not that falling apart is in some machismo way desirable or pleasurable or necessarily recommended as a salve for one's wounds from daily living, only that pain and inconvenience and despair is unavoidably a part of the circle of life. Americans, particularly those blessed with material comfort, sometimes forget that. We believe that inconveniences like poverty, disease, or early death are for others but not us.

For some, falling apart ends in death, the final, final curtain of our existence. For others, death is a significant station stop on the journey of our existence, but not the ultimate destination. Something else beckons us when life draws to a close. If you choose to believe this line of thinking, it could be tantamount to what Wizard Dumbledore references "beyond" when

speaking to Harry Potter after both have died and are lingering in the train station of the after-life.

The point is no one can possibly duck falling apart in any number of ways in our life journeys: financially, emotionally, physically. How we cope with this reality is for us to decide.

Meditation

Let's take a few moments to breathe together. To conspire. We are all too far away from one another today. But we can breathe together. Divided all too often by religion and culture. Divided by age, and economic status. Yet, inescapably, we breathe together. If you affirm this, now, breathe. If you do not affirm this, go ahead and not breathe. See where that gets you.

Close your eyes and seal your feet to the earth.

Our breath, now, connects earth to sky. We are fire, we are water, connecting all to all, through all, with all, for all, and by all.

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Picture this. This is a story of the Osage people called "Children of the Sun"

Far back in time the Osage lived in the sky, wondering where they had come from. They wandered to the Sun, who told them that they were his children. They wandered to the moon who told them she was their mother...and that they must now go to live on the earth. They looked down to see that the earth was covered with water. There was no place for them to live.

They asked Elk (for the animals were also wandering with them) they asked Elk, who was fine and stately, to help them. Elk jumped into the water and thrashed around perilously. Then he called to the winds for help and they blew aside the water so that Elk would not drown. At first there was only rocks and mud. But Elk was so happy to have survived that he rolled all over in joy. As he did all the hairs from his body were pulled off into the mud. And each one sprouted into something green: corn, beans, turnips, grasses, and trees.

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Over the last few months, we have experienced so many emotional twists and turns, ups and downs. But no matter how many *ups* there have been, the cumulative heartbreak has been battering.

Few would choose to make the sacrifice of Elk. I don't know that if I was hurtling pell-mell through rocks and mud that I would be so happy for surviving that I'd be rolling with joy. I don't at all like the idea of having all the hairs from my body pulled off into the mud. But I do like the idea of there being something good to come from it all.

Don't misunderstand, this story is not a glorification of suffering. I think it's more a description of the inevitable. Even the creatures of the sky, eventually, find themselves drawn to the earth, where we are called upon to make our home wherever we land. We all have cause to remember

with gratitude those who have taken this journey before us. And we all have cause to consider what kind of a home we wish to leave behind for the generations to come.

This moment, right now, is a moment to land. To be still. Rebalance. We do not yet need to debrief, introspect, reflect on how we got here or plan for what's next. It is a day of sabbath.

Even the ancients, who scraped the ground for their food, discovered that rest is essential to survival. Our soft animal bodies / our overactive imaginations / our interpersonal tensions ... all of these are necessary ... but no more necessary than periods of letting them go.

Eracism Claire Lending

Message

My first week at my previous congregation was the week of 9-11. A week later, or, I don't know, ten days ... it was all a blur ... how long was it before we emerged from lockdown and self-imposed moratorium on joy and laughter? Out of respect for the dead and all those who mourned, even those of us far removed, in solidarity, grieved and showed restraint. And we worried what would come next.

At some point along this way, having held things together for just a little too long, Jane and I went to the movie *Rat Race*. It was a reasonably funny movie but I just lost control a couple of times. I simply could not stop laughing, even when this became painful, embarrassing, and I grew short of breath. I had already cried a few times in the intervening days, but this, for some reason, was the way to really open up the hydrant and release the built up emotional pressure.

It was a let down. Not let down as in disappointment. Not let down as in sorrow. Let down: as whatever was holding me rigidly upright finally letting me lie down. It was an unlikely form of deliverance, perhaps, but one way or another our bodies, minds, and souls will find an outlet. For some of us, restful sleep comes naturally. Or talking. Or prayer. Some of us engage in fierce exercise, or substance abuse, self harm, or we lash out at others.

What is SPIRITUAL in all of this? Well, in harm to self or others, nothing. But, when we can find alternative forms of release, we find our ego melting away, and find instead, like in the poem Rod shared earlier, we find that there are no parts. We let slip the illusion of separateness, and surrender to the oneness, without self, rediscover our true place ... [one with The Way]

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After an extended period of stress, regardless of the outcome, it's predictable that we're going to crash. By crash I don't mean we have to feel awful. Emotional exhaustion isn't inherently awful. But it is real and it's understandable. Nor does crashing from emotional exhaustion necessarily mean that we're going to get hurt. Or be unable to function, and unable to fulfil our responsibilities. But it will mean being physically tired, off your game, in and out of focus, irritable, hyper, unusually silly, or weepy ... whether that's weepy from joy or grief or relief or all of the above.

I assure you that my family and I have been weepy this week!

Whether we're accomplishing some great purpose, completing a huge project, escaping a threat, reaching what appears to be the finish line of a big personal milestone, or coming just short of meeting an outrageous expectation, ... there's going to be a let down from our heightened state of vigilance / fear / hunger / or exhilaration.

We can prepare for it, and come down a little easier. Or we can see it coming at the last minute—and make a point to slow down gradually rather than slamming on the brakes. And by slowing down gradually, I don't mean slowing down *before* reaching the finish line. That's the way to go when possible, but sometimes that's not an option. Sometimes *we do* have to work till 4 am the night before vacation. But we avoid that when possible.

Because often, after the big apparent finish line, like an election night, there are more hurdles: like the declaring of a winner, and hearing the other candidate concede, and the lawsuits, and the recounts and the certifications, and the run offs, and the actual removal of an incumbent from office ... when somehow we can't take these things for granted.

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Once again today, I have a Brene Brown podcast to point you toward. At the end of the service I'll put the link in the chat. [<https://brenebrown.com/podcast/brene-with-emily-and-amelia-nagoski-on-burnout-and-how-to-complete-the-stress-cycle/>] Brene talks about burnout (so you could also just google: Brene Brown Burnout).

I'll share briefly what I thought was her most salient point: Just because a stress-related event comes to an end, or a project, or activity, or trauma, illness, or accident ... or a highly emotional life passage ... just because you get to that point in time when it appears that it's "over," that doesn't mean the feelings stop.

Intuitively we probably realize this. But, pragmatically, we may say to ourselves, "OK, I don't have any right, or any reason, to still be feeling stressed. It's over. I'm done with all that."

And maybe everyone around you sends you the same message: "Drop it, it's over." Or maybe we *think* that's what everyone else is thinking. So we try to bring the feelings to a screeching halt. And neither our feelings nor our bodies cooperate.

This is the case when we're talking about those emotions that we roughly categorize as positive ... *and* those emotions that we roughly categorize as negative. And it's especially true regarding complex mixtures of emotion. Which, maybe, some of us have been feeling—within recent memory.

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I think I'll leave it at that regarding what may be going on *within / ourselves* after a long period of emotional intensity.

But something like this also happens in our *relationships*. One-on-one relationships ... small groups, extended families, congregations... activist communities, political parties, and nations ... when we come to the end of a long difficult cycle of activity.

But knowing that there are always multiple cycles cycling simultaneously, imagine how complicated it gets with different people moving through unexpected and understandably erratic emotional fluctuations—out of synch with one another. When one of us wants to fight, another chooses flight, another instinctively freezes. I'm guessing that within some of our households this week—and I'm talking households even where everyone was hoping for the same outcome—that there were events and announcements that led one family member to laugh sarcastically and another to cry in anger. Maybe at another moment, in sheer bewilderment, one of you went silent, your heart nearly stopped, while your partner stomped on the floor and yelled at the cat.

It is good when we can make room for one another to express ourselves, non-violently, even in ways that neither we nor our loved ones expect. Because that is the way toward healing which we now see opening.

And the way leads on.

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When we've worked very hard together, or dreamed really big together, or waited for a really long time together ... and it seems like our chances of succeeding, together, are uncertain, or waning, or our options have narrowed ... we may find ourselves in conflict with friends, and allies, when we envision different paths to the same goal.

It's good when we can make room for one another's doubts. When one of us is optimistic and another pessimistic, and we both insist we're just being realistic ... it's good when we can be imaginative, patient, and committed to finding win-win solutions. When we break through our unnecessarily limited visions of who we are. When we discover within ourselves, and among ourselves, ideas and brilliance and courage that we didn't know was there.

Extraordinary stress will often knock us down. Maybe tear us apart. And then, from among those parts, we find new arrangements, juxtapositions, and synergies, healing and a new sense of wholeness.

A bit of this is playing out within BUF right now as we wrangle over a proposed resolution called the 8th Principle. I encourage all BUF members to come to our congregational meeting after the service next Sunday. I think we are going to have a civil, meaningful debate about something that we believe is very important, but we disagree over how to express it.

In my 25 years of Unitarian Universalist ministry, despite our ferocious claim to disagreeing without being disagreeable, I don't know that I have ever seen such a conversation play out at a congregational meeting. Usually the conversations, sometimes productive but often passive or aggressive, take place behind the scenes. And sometimes this actually works. But it depends upon the stakes, it depends upon the relationships, and it depends on whether the rooms where

these conversations take place are or are not perceived to be wide open to everyone. When we're trying to maximize buy-in, perceptions matter.

This fall we have not had any rooms in which to be together in the best ways that we know how to best be together. I'm going to leave it at that. Except to say that adversaries cannot always find win-win solutions. But allies can.

And I'll note that while *the scene* is next Sunday following the service, there is another room behind the scenes where we're meeting for openhearted discussion today after the service. Jeff will post that link in a few minutes.

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Falling apart is part of the rhythm of life. It's probably something that needs to happen on a regular basis. Our hairs drop out, whether we're rolling in the mud or not. Our ideas wear out. Our spirits tire out. When this happens, and we persist in the illusion that we have control over what cannot be controlled, we are likely to crash in an uncontrolled maybe un-survivable way. This is not the way for us today.

We are compassionate people who have been worried about others month after month, frustrated when we feel that there is so little that we can do, emotionally exhausted because, for many of us, it has seemed like there has been no emotional outlet.

But we are not alone. Our cycles intersect, overlap, and smooth, in time, to a steady hum. Find that hum with me now. OM————

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As we rediscover the steady depths beneath the storm, my friends, we shall continue to love the hell out of this world.

Hymn *Spirit of Life* in English & Hungarian

Collection for our Partner Church in Magyarszovat, Hungary

Cat McIntyre reads recent letters from Magyarszovat

Offertory Reka Zoltan on zither

Hymn *We Are Not Our Own*

Benediction

Look, the world
is always ending
somewhere.

Somewhere
the sun has come
crashing down.

Somewhere
it has gone
completely dark.

Somewhere
it has ended
with the gun,
the knife,
the fist.

Somewhere
it has ended
with the utter quiet
that follows the news
from the phone,
the television,
the hospital room.

Somewhere
it has ended
with a tenderness
that will break
your heart.

But, listen,
this blessing means
to be anything
but morose.
It has not come
to cause despair.

It is simply here
because there is
nothing
a blessing
is better suited for
than an ending,
nothing that cries out
more
for a blessing
than when a world
is falling apart.

This blessing
will not fix you,
will not mend you,
will not give you
false comfort;
it will not talk to you
about one door
opening
when another one
closes.

It will simply
sit itself beside you
among the shards
and gently turn your
face
toward the direction
from which the light
will come,
gathering itself
about you
as the world begins
again.

—Jan Richardson

Circle 'Round

Postlude

Szekeley Kerestur Youth Dance Troupe