

**“When Life Goes Awry”**  
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**Harvard Unitarian Universalist Church**  
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When she was in her mid-thirties, a married professional with 4 young children, Sylvia Boorstein realized how vulnerable everything in her life was. Two young girls in her neighborhood – six- and seven-year old sisters – were hit by a car on their way to school and killed. She didn’t know them, but one of her daughters was a classmate of theirs. “Suddenly,” she says, she “woke up to the fact that being alive is very dangerous and every moment of life is very precious.”

Boorstein - a psychologist, and now a Buddhist meditation teacher, – describes with poignancy the gloom and despair she felt after that tragic accident. She tells the old Kierkegaard joke in which “someone said to Kierkegaard, ‘I’ll see you next Tuesday,’ and he responded, ‘Ha, I’ll see you next Tuesday if, as you leave my house, a tile does not fall off the roof and hit you in the head and if, as you cross the street, you are not run over by a carriage out of control.’”

It is not a funny joke, she admits, but it does sum up how she felt. She says she “could not say ‘I’ll see you later’ to [her] children as they left for school...without hearing ominous overtones ringing in [her] ears.”<sup>1</sup>

It has been two weeks now since the tragic accident that took the life of Jessie Peterson, and left her mother in the hospital with a broken pelvis and a broken heart, and their family – and our whole town reeling with grief. So many of us have been affected – those who knew her, and those who only wish they had.

We have been not only sad, but also bewildered – how could such a thing happen? Some of us have been angry. Some of us have been afraid, for our own lives and for the lives of those whom we love. I imagine that for some among us, it has been a challenge to say goodbye to our families in the morning without giving thought to the wanton unpredictability and fragility of life.

When I first decided to preach about how we might cope when our lives go awry, I wasn’t thinking about tragedy. I wasn’t thinking about death at all. I was thinking about smaller things – about life’s little disappointments. I was wondering how we might cope, for instance, when a job doesn’t turn out to be what we expected, or when someone – a person or an institution – does something that we experience as terribly unfair. I was thinking about the pain and disappointment that come during those times when sudden illness throws off our week, or when the original project plans are unreachably expensive and we are left with a much scaled back set of drawings.

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<sup>1</sup> Boorstein, Sylvia. *It’s Easier Than You Think: The Buddhist Way to Happiness*, San Francisco: Harper, 1995, (16-17).

But life goes awry in all sorts of ways and adversity comes in all shapes and sizes. Some disappointments are merely annoying, while other losses are soul crushing. Big or small, though, adversity is an inevitable part of every life. Into every life fall some sadness, some challenge, and some pain.

The 1<sup>st</sup> Noble Truth of Buddhism is often translated to read, “All is suffering.” Boorstein translates it slightly differently, however. She says, “pain is inevitable, suffering is optional.” Or as Unitarian Universalist minister, Forrest Church, puts it, “everyone suffers, but not everyone despairs.”<sup>2</sup>

The question is not whether, but when. And the *real* question is, as Barbara Merritt put it, “What relationship we will have to that adversity?”

Will we hate it? Will we attempt to escape it, perhaps through destructive addictions to alcohol or drugs? Will we engage in behaviors that are so excessive that they momentarily distract and console us? Will we withdraw into self-pity, depression, or whining complaint? Will we become angry and project our unhappiness onto society, or some external targets? Will we blame...?<sup>3</sup>

In other words, will we try to flee from it or will we try to fight it? Both are natural, normal, instinctive, animal responses for us – fight and flight. As Barbara Merritt says, “We have an instinctive and healthy desire to avoid that which interrupts and disturbs plans, causes suffering and anguish, or seems to threaten our security, health, and well-being.”<sup>4</sup>

However, those instincts, fine and true as they are, do not always serve us well. For once whatever the disappointment is has passed, and history has been made, and there is no turning back, then we can no longer run or hide, and there is nothing left to fight but the phantom of a dream gone bust. If we could see the truth in those moments, we would see that our fleeing and our fighting are in vain and that through our exertions, we are only causing ourselves more pain.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> Noble Truth of Buddhism is that it is our clinging that causes us to suffer. Forrest Church said it well: “During the course of a lifetime,” he said, “all of us suffer shipwrecks. The problem comes when people bring their wrecked ship with them.”<sup>5</sup> What an image! The storm has passed. The ship is wrecked on the rocks. We have somehow, miraculously, made it to shore alive. We could feel immensely grateful for that alone, and sometimes we do. But other times, instead of accepting the loss and walking away, we strap the wreckage to our backs and carry it wherever we go. Imagine how that wreckage could get in our way, how it could limit us.

I’ve been thinking lately of the book *The Horse Whisperer* and the story of Pilgrim, the horse that barely survives a tragic accident of his own that leaves him physically and psychically wounded. His physical wounds heal in time, but he is not the horse he once was. He has become

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<sup>2</sup> Church, Forrest, *Life Lines*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1996, (xvii)

<sup>3</sup> Merritt, Barbara. “Adversity,” in *Everyday Spiritual Practice* (ed. Scott Alexander), Boston: Skinner House, 1999, (54).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, (53)

<sup>5</sup> Church, (75).

unrideable. He has set himself apart from the other horses, and he lashes out at everyone and everything that comes close to him. He doesn't trust anyone or anything. He was let down. He did his best – did what he was supposed to do – but he was betrayed by life. He is afraid. And he is fighting....

There is a scene in the book in which Tom Booker, the horse whisperer, says about Pilgrim that he has forgotten how to be a horse. In other words, you might say, he has forgotten how to live in the moment, how to respond to what *is* rather than to what *was* or what *might someday be*. One of his instincts – the instinct to fight - has turned against him, and now he is living by a twisted sort of fear instead of by instinct. And, in so doing, he is putting himself in danger, for a herd animal that doesn't act like a herd animal is, as Tom says, "bear bait."<sup>6</sup> 204-205)

We, too, are like that. Or we can be. Sometimes when things go awry we cut ourselves off from the people we need – and who need us - the most. And we carry on our backs all of our resentment toward the past and all of our fears of the future. Over time they begin to weigh us down. And because we're so focused on the past and the future, we are in danger of missing out entirely on the possibilities that linger in every present moment – the very possibilities that might help us get out from under our load.

It's like the story we heard this morning about the doorbell ringing. Adversity keeps knocking at the door. If we live out of a place of resentment or fear, we might decide to bar the door and refuse to answer it, in order to try to escape the pain. Or we might answer the door and yell at whomever is standing on the other side. We might try to fight it.

Or – and here, of course, is the lesson of the story - we might decide, as hard as it may be, to stay open to what comes and to welcome it into our lives. And sometimes when we do that, life just might present us with an unexpected, but oh so sweet surprise.

In one of the final scenes of *The Horse Whisperer*, Tom has Pilgrim hobbled and is trying to get him to go down on his knees, but he keeps fighting. He stumbles, but then he fights his way back up. Slowly, finally, he surrenders, and he falls first to his knees, and then onto his side. And as he lies there in the dirt, Tom orders his young rider, Grace, to stroke his legs and his neck and chest, and then finally to stand on top of him.

Grace is distraught. To her, this whole exercise feels terribly cruel. It feels to her like Pilgrim had no choice – that he was a victim yet again. But Tom Booker corrects her perception. He says to her, no, Pilgrim "had the choice to go on fighting life or to accept it...it was hard as hell, but he could have gone on. Gone on making himself more and more unhappy. But what he chose to do instead was to go to the brink and look beyond. And he saw what was there and he chose to accept it." In other words, he finally chose to stop fighting an old fight. Tom goes on to say:

"What just happened to him, laying down like that, was the worst thing he could imagine. And you know what? He found out it was okay. Even you standing on him was okay. He

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<sup>6</sup> Evans, Nicholas, *The Horse Whisperer*, New York: Dell, 1995, (204-205).

saw you meant him no harm. The darkest hour comes before the dawn. That was Pilgrim's darkest hour and he survived it.”<sup>7</sup>

And with that, Pilgrim's suffering ends. Miraculously. Almost unbelievably...but then, it is just a story.

The third noble truth of Buddhism is indeed that the cessation of suffering is possible. And Sylvia Boorstein says she believes that wholeheartedly. But even after all these years of meditation, she says she has not achieved it. She has not personally experienced the kind of miraculous end of suffering that Pilgrim experienced. She *still* suffers. She still feels pain when she experiences a loss or a disappointment. She is human after all and this is real life.

So she has extrapolated a new noble truth, which she calls the 3<sup>rd</sup> and a half noble truth, which says, “Suffering is manageable.”<sup>8</sup>

Once, after that accident that took the lives of those two young girls, after she had discovered Buddhism and meditation and had become a teacher, she was at a gathering of Buddhist meditation teachers. And she says that as she listened to the members of the group share their stories of the year, all of which included real problems and real pain, she heard them each say some version of, “But I'm doing all right” or “I'm pretty happy.”

And in that moment, she realized that what they were all doing was “managing gracefully.” It may not sound like much, but, as she points out, it is so much better than what *she* used to do, which was to manage tensely or manage fearfully. “Everyone manages one way or another,” she says.<sup>9</sup> We might as well learn to manage gracefully.

You might say that learning to manage gracefully is exactly what spiritual practice is about. How, in the midst of the storms of life, and sometimes even the shipwrecks, do we keep from getting our emotional feathers so ruffled that we can no longer use them to fly? Barbara Merritt believes “There may be no practice as transformative, as effective, and as ultimately beneficial as adversity.”

In her essay, she retells a story by Rumi in which a young man seeking enlightenment goes to look for a wise teacher of whom he has heard great things. He arrives after a long journey at the teacher's house and knocks on the door. The teacher's wife answers, and she is simply awful. She screams at him, she insults him, she calls her husband “a fraud and the young man a fool.”<sup>10</sup>

The young man is not persuaded to give up his search, and he continues on until eventually he finds the teacher in the woods, riding on a lion, having the ability to tame wild beasts. But the young man is perplexed, for he wonders how such an enlightened teacher could have a wife like the one who met him at the door and sent him away. The teacher tells him that “he had not

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., (413-417).

<sup>8</sup> Boorstein, (26).

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., (5).

<sup>10</sup> Merritt, (55).

chosen his wife and that he did not desire her company.” “Enduring her public distain,” he said, “has made me strong and patient. She is my practice.”<sup>11</sup>

What – or whom - is your practice?

What is it in your own life for which you had not asked and which you never would have chosen?

There are many things, I’m sure, but choose one. Which is most present now?

What is the size and shape of your adversity?

And what is your relationship to it?

Have you tried to escape from it?

How long have you been running?

Have you been fighting it tooth and nail?

How long have you fought?

What might it teach you if you were to stop running, stop fighting?

What might you learn? How might you grow?

Your ship has already wrecked. Are you carrying the shipwreck with you?

What might it feel like to put it down?

What might it feel like to say to yourself, “Yes, my ship has wrecked. It is not what I wanted. It is not what I’d hoped for. This is not where I wanted to be. But it has wrecked. That leg of my journey has come to an end.”

Sit there on the beach.

Look around you. Listen to the water, to the seabirds, to the wind.

I wonder...when will you allow the next leg of your journey to begin?

So many possible new beginnings abound.

If you sit there for a while with Adversity, perhaps it will show you the way to begin again.

As Barbara Merritt writes, “Welcoming adversity as a normal part of one’s spiritual life is one way of expressing faith and trust in the possibility that despite the confinement and limitations of the moment, there is greater joy and abundance to come.”<sup>12</sup>

That is my prayer for you...during this season of spring - this season in which tender new life pushes its way through the hard, cold earth to sprout anew – that you might discover the abundance that lies on the other side of adversity; that you might discover within your heart a well of patience, and courage, and strength that bubble up quietly; and that joy might take root in your heart and grow in your life anew.

So may it be.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., (57).