"One Year Later"

Sermon (in letter form) by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval

Unitarian Church of Montpelier

March 14, 2021

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March 14, 2020

Dear Joan,

It's me. I mean, it's you. Well, it's you a year from the day you are receiving this letter. Through the magic of the imagination, I am sending a letter back to you in time from the date March 14, 2021. I know things are getting weird already with the the first cases of the novel coronavirus being diagnosed in the United States, the World Health Organization having just declared a global pandemic, and just yesterday, Governor Scott having declared a State of Emergency. Now, here you are with this letter from the future in your hands.

There are some things I wanted to say to you now that you've lived through what you will find out has been a massively disrupted, painful, and yet also an infused-with-ordinary-joy kind of year. I know you're probably thinking - haven't the last few years already been rough enough? Yeah, they have been, and the Covid-19 pandemic is going to add to the pain in some deep ways.

I might as well share some hard facts now. The loss of human life from Covid-19 will amount to an unprecedented number. The first presumptive coronavirus case has just barely been detected in Vermont, and so it's likely that these figures are going to be inconceivable to you. As of the day I write you this letter, the global death toll of the pandemic amounts to over two and a half million; over 530,000 deaths in the United States; and 214 in the state of Vermont. It's okay to pause here. I know the numbers are staggering.

Over the next year, you will shed many tears as new, then inconceivable milestones, are reached. 50,000; 100,000; 250,000; half a million.

Amidst the collective pain, I can offer you this balm: Not one person in your congregation is counted amongst those numbers of people lost to Covid-19. Not one

close family member or loved one is counted amongst those numbers of the dead. Go ahead, weep with relief.

In so many ways in the days ahead, you will re-discover how fortunate and privileged you are by virtue of where you live, your full-time employment, your family's access to quality public school education, your home ownership.

You will soon learn that, in the United States, Black, Indigenous, and Latinx communities will be disproportionately impacted by the virus and the disease it causes. Essential workers of all kinds will soon be at the front lines of treating patients in overflowing hospitals, trying to save people's lives, staffing grocery stores and making deliveries, picking vegetables and milking cows. Many of these people are Black and Brown with underlying health conditions that make them more susceptible to the virus' ravaging effects on the respiratory system.

The early days of the pandemic will reveal how dangerous and deadly the virus can be, to Black and Brown folx, and also older people and people with certain health risks. Front line health care workers will go to heroic measures to protect us. The depth of their service and sacrifice will be profound.

I know one of the primary questions on your mind at the moment is what will happen to church. You're already taking short term precautions canceling activities with more than 25 people per the UUA recommendations. Your email to the whole church community yesterday said that this suspension would last for two weeks at which time you and church leaders will re-assess, but, based on the reading you're starting to do, you are suspecting that church activities will need to shut down and the building will need to close for a much longer time. Fortunately, the UUA will provide early guidance to you and the state of Vermont will soon follow suite with its own science-drive, public health guidelines.

Joan, it is probably not helpful to outline for you all of the changes you will need to make in your own personal life and in the life of the church community you serve to respond to this historic pandemic. Know that, despite how stressful it will be and how many times you will wonder if you're doing the right thing, every step of the way you will be surrounded by people who care as deeply as you do and who are willing to muddle through it together.

Over the next few months especially, you will learn more about Zoom and other virtual platforms, webcams and microphones and recording devices than you could have ever wanted or imagined. There will be times in the months to come when you say to colleagues, "This isn't the ministry I signed up for." That is true. So much of ministry and church life will feel painfully and woefully different from the ministry you have grown to cherish.

There are so many faces that you will miss seeing up close and not through a computer screen or behind a face mark, so many peoples' hands you will long to shake, and bodies you will yearn to wrap up in a big, warm hug. Though you are truly an introvert, you will still miss the energy that comes from two hundred people gathered together in the same space. You will soon learn how dangerous it is to sing with others, despite the fact that tomorrow, March 15, 2020, the Church Choir is planning to gather and sing during the first live streamed service of this pandemic in the sanctuary. It turns out that singing - that beloved act of making vibrations with others that reach into the depth of the human heart - is one of the best ways of spreading the coronavirus.

The physical distancing that is needed to keep one another safe and healthy will mean the loss of so many ways of being together - in your church community and in your personal life.

That sorrow you already feel beginning to well up in the pit of your stomach is the grief you know is coming.

It will be helpful to remember that you and everyone around you is going through a traumatic event on a massive scale. And, while you have responsibilities to others and to the leadership role you hold, you, too, are experiencing this crisis. You, too, will be navigating the shock, the anxiety, the scrambling to work and take care of a child's needs, and the exhaustion of adapting each day to new information and new restrictions, new losses and then more.

So, here is some gently offered advice: Get plenty of rest. Let go of expectations. Lean on others for support.

You will find that there are many people in the community who can quickly mobilize mutual aid systems and who will begin to extend to one another concrete, material support. There will be meal drop-offs and face-mask sewing and

distribution and picking up groceries for neighbors. These acts of care will be glimmers of hope for the kind of world you long for - where care for all is put before power and profit.

The pandemic will reveal the big cracks in society into which far too many people fall and are forgotten. Racial inequalities, income inequalities, ableism and other intersecting oppressions and injustices will only be made worse, and it will be made clear how extensively the de-investment in our health care system and public infrastructure and brushing aside of these growing inequalities will cause continued suffering.

The public health crisis will lead to an economic crisis with profound impacts for so many as work is suspended and jobs lost. (Relief will eventually come, but not without great political wrangling.)

Times of crisis can also be a focusing time, and the need to care for one another is already crystal clear. Practical care and advocacy with those too often left at the margins will continue to be important and necessary.

Within this time of disruption, there will also be opportunity for connecting in ways that have become less prevalent and less practiced for you with the ubiquity of digital communications. You'll learn about getting back to basics, like sending letters in the mail and picking up the phone and leaving messages for people you care about but have been too busy to call. You will connect with your family in deeper ways, when you're not sick of one another's company, which will also happen during the most intense period of lockdown. Board games and movie nights will become cherished family activities, and, not to give too much away, but there may also be a fun at-home construction project in your future. (A castle in the sky? Not quite, but close!)

You will mark major milestones and holidays with adaptive creativity. Yes, you absolutely can sing "Happy Birthday" over Zoom even if it doesn't sound perfect! And, a seven year-old will still enjoy his chocolate birthday cake especially not having to share it with others.

You see, you will find humor and delight amidst the pain and sadness.

The coronavirus pandemic will not be the only major source of stress and disruption over the next year. This particular public health crisis will continue alongside other crises that have long been present in American society, most especially the pandemic of racism and the violence against Black bodies engrained into this country's founding.

More Black lives will be lost to police violence, and in gruesome ways. The first time you will see many of the people you serve again in person will be in a few months as people gather in the streets and at the State House - wearing masks and keeping some distance between them - to declare, yet again, that Black Lives Matter.

The urgency of the moment will be felt by so many, especially in light of the national focus on the upcoming presidential election and all that is at stake. You and others will find creative ways to be engaged, to organize, to support BIPOC led groups, to make your voices heard.

The divisiveness of the last few years will remain as present as ever, and you will grapple with how to hold your own moral commitments alongside compassion for those with whom you vehemently disagree. This tension will show up in some very personal ways. This conflict isn't a bad thing and, held with love, will strengthen some important relationships in your life.

As time goes on and the trauma of the pandemic continues to unfold, you will notice how people's lives are shifting in transformational ways.

You will witness people you know and love discovering truer versions of themselves. You will witness people you know and love finding deeper meaning in their relationships and also letting go of relationships in honor of that truer self.

This time, for some, will be a time of awakening and reckoning and of - sometimes painful and sometimes healing - transformation.

The complexity of who we are as human beings will come to life in this time of crisis.

As I write to you a year later, there are signs that we may have gotten through the worst of this coronavirus pandemic. Vaccines are becoming more readily available. Growing immunization along with continued safety precautions may mean some ability to do "normal" things, like have friends over for a meal, in the not too distant future.

How good it will be for Liam to get to hug his grandparents again!

I hope that these words from the future bring you some comfort, if only, to say to you - yes, you can make it. Too many people will be lost along the way, AND this moment, this crisis won't last forever.

Trust yourself and trust in others.

Stay committed to all the things that nourish you and make you feel more whole. Stay committed to your own learning and growth. Stay committed to doing this in tightly woven community.

I'm rooting for you.

With love,

Joan