

“Even If They Are a Crowd of Sorrows”

Sermon by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval

Unitarian Church of Montpelier

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The delivered sermon may have slight variations from this written manuscript. Video recordings of sermons can be found online at <https://ucmyt.org/category/whats-new/sermons-and-podcasts/>.

Reading “The Guest House” Jalal al-Din Rumi (trans. Coleman Barks)¹

This being human is a guest house.
Every morning a new arrival...

Be grateful for whoever comes,
because each has been sent
as a guide from beyond.

Sermon

When my now almost eleven year-old child was younger, there were many moments when he would break down into tears. Sometimes it was because he had fallen down while still taking his first tentative steps. Other times it was because the building blocks he had stacked had fallen to the ground. Sometimes it wasn't clear what had brought on the tears.

In these moments, my instinct was to pick him up and assure him that everything was okay. To shush away the tears as my parents had done with me. To make the crying, and at times discomfoting wailing, stop.

As he grew older, I noticed how family members would respond when he was upset. “Oh, it's okay, no need to cry.” Or, “It's okay, come look at this toy.” Or even, “Be a good boy. No crying.” Minimalization, distraction, and socialization into traditional gender norms were often the immediate responses to any sign of distress.

¹ Find the full poem here: <https://grateful.org/resource/guest-house-rumi/>

I imagine some of you may have heard or even uttered these words at one time or another. Cultural norms have conditioned many of us to respond in these ways to a child's pain.

It took me a while to realize that the thing my child most needed was for me to accept how he was feeling and to accept how I was feeling about how he was feeling without that getting in the way of being present.

Eventually, I was able to meet his pain and difficult emotions with acceptance: "Oh, that's frustrating isn't it," when the building blocks tumbled to the ground. And, "Oww, that hurts," when he scraped his knee on the pavement.

Over time, it became clearer to me that the acceptance my child needed in those moments of pain or frustration was also what I needed when I encountered difficult circumstances and feelings. We do a disservice to our children, just as we do to ourselves, when we turn away from our places of hurt, anger, and sadness.

From the words of Rumi:

"A joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes
as an unexpected visitor.

Welcome and entertain them all!
Even if they're a crowd of sorrows,
who violently sweep your house
empty of its furniture,
still, treat each guest honorably."

Some of these guests have short stays and some of them may seem as if they've moved in with no intention of leaving. What would it look like to treat these guests - even if they're a crowd of sorrows - honorably?

To me, this means accepting the fullness of our human experience at face value. To be present to our internal lives without judgment. The happiness and contentment, the loneliness and sorrow - all of it is part of being human.

So often, though, we resist how it is, and in this resistance, we create more suffering. Pushing away, or simply not acknowledging, what we call “difficult” emotions can cause more turmoil and unrest in our spirits. Or worse, we might turn towards harmful behaviors to numb these emotions all together.

What if instead we opened our hearts to an attentive and accepting presence?

This is the poem, “Peace Is This Moment Without Judgment,” by mindfulness teacher, Dorothy Hunt.

*Do you think peace requires an end to war?
Or tigers eating only vegetables?
Does peace require an absence from
your boss, your spouse, yourself?...*

*Peace is this moment without judgment,
this moment in the Heart-space where
everything that is is welcome.²*

Where everything that is is welcome.

Let us pause now (and I really will take a pause), and I invite you to notice what is...now. What thoughts or emotions or sensations are present with you now?

And, for these few moments, can you let whatever is just be as it is without judgment?

Acceptance of what is isn’t about saying everything is okay or that we won’t do anything to change circumstances that are harmful or unjust.

If the pain you are feeling is because you or a loved one has just received a serious medical diagnosis, acceptance doesn’t mean you won’t seek treatment or healing.

If the anger you are feeling is because there are children up the road sleeping in tents at night, acceptance doesn’t mean doing nothing but shaking your head at the situation.

² Find the full poem here: <https://www.dorothyhunt.org/peace-is-this-moment>

Trebbe Johnson, writer and founder of the organization, Radical Joy for Hard Times, writes, "Acceptance does not mean surrender. It does not mean resignation. Acceptance means I am finally available to the entire spectrum of creative responses."

I am finally available to the entire spectrum of creative responses.

Acceptance is a necessary step in facing the often difficult realities in front of us without negating, minimizing, or subduing the feelings - be it anger, sadness, or heartache - that arise due to these realities. Whether it is the loss of someone we love, a chronic illness, hunger, homelessness, or ecological devastation, acknowledging what is and accepting this reality for what it is allows us to respond creatively and courageously.

Again, accepting that things are the way they are does not mean surrendering the possibility for change or one's agency. Acceptance is part of the inner work needed in order to show up for oneself and for others. When we are fully able to be with heartache, anger, and grief, we can then face the difficult realities outside of us and access the creative responses needed to meet the moment.

And for those of you on the edge of burnout, I will say this includes accepting when you have become too immersed in pain and suffering and what is needed is to step away for a time.

Accepting external circumstances and our inner emotional world go hand in hand as we open up to creative responses. Accepting the severity of the climate crisis, for example, means accepting the grief that arises in fully facing this reality and accessing the love for the planet that can move us into action. Accepting deeply embedded militarism and a war economy means accepting pain and anger and accessing a commitment to life that can ignite speaking up for peace.

As we face what is present now, a window opens to what can be.

Accepting that there is sadness means that we can express love more deeply.

Accepting that there is loneliness means that we can seek connection.

Accepting that there is anger means that we can give voice to injustice.

Accepting that there is humility means that we can try something new.

Accepting that there is compassion means that we can listen deeply.
Accepting that there is gratitude means that we can give generously.

The Buddhist meditation teacher and author Sharon Salzberg writes: “With more fully opening to the truth of what is painful as a launchpad, and a vision of all that we are capable of as a North Star, we can learn to breathe more freely, to connect to one another, to live, and to love, even in difficult circumstances. We develop a ministry of presence for ourselves and for the world--a council of connection, tenderness, and caring in the face of both great happiness and inescapable sorrow.”³

May we fully open to the truth of what is and a vision of what can be so that we can be a caring and tender presence for ourselves and for the world.

So may it be.

³ Sharon Salzberg, *Real Life: The Journey from Isolation to Openness and Freedom*, p. 93.