

Learning to Swim: a Survivor's Guide to Living in Turbulent Times

For: The First Unitarian Fellowship of Nanaimo

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Hello Friends in Nanaimo,

Our gathering this Sunday had to be cancelled due to the snow. I'm sorry not to see you all – I was looking forward to it. However I can at least offer my words to you, thanks to the miracle of the Internet. It is written to be read aloud so you will find some odd things like extra capitals for emph-ASIS! Unfortunately I have not footnoted the references. My texts were Homer-Dixon's article from the *Globe & Mail* (spring 2007), Campbell's *The Power of Myth*, and Parker's *Blessing The World: What Can Save Us Now*.

May these words find meaning in your heart.

Namaste,

Antonia Won

Learning to Swim: a Survivor's Guide to Living in Turbulent Times

I have a question. When you were a child, how many of you had swimming lessons?...my mother told me everybody had to take swimming lessons...

Mine were always in June, immediately after end of school, an unwelcome but necessary ritual I had to go through before I was truly free for the carefree days of summer....

I grew up in rural Quebec where indoor pools were unheard of, and in late June – when my lessons started - the water temperature of outdoor pools was about 1 degree above glacial. I dreaded swimming lessons – not because I didn't like swimming but because I HATED jumping in the water. The shock of the cold was not something I subjected myself to voluntarily but my loud appeals for mercy to my mother had no effect. She said that the risk of falling in water was great enough that EVERYONE had to learn to swim.

You see, my grandparents had a waterfront cottage and boats, ... my family were hikers, frequently crossing frigid streams on nothing more than two saplings lashed together, and we often spent weekends crammed in our canoe, paddling across the lakes

of Vermont and the Adirondacks, my case for skipping swimming lessons was rather...weak.

So into the glacial waters of the Otterburn public swimming pool I went, preparing for that day when I would find myself in unknown waters and over my head.

Well, it seems that this has been truer as a metaphor than a reality. Physically I have a good sense of balance and so far I've managed to avoid capsizing any boats. On the other hand, as a metaphor for life the waters indeed seem awfully deep and unknown. I don't think this is only because I'm older and wiser. Life is not getting easier; it's getting more confusing, more fluid and uncertain. As a parent, I'm finding it difficult to give my children a hopeful view of the future without denying some big realities. I don't know what kind of a foundation will be a good one for them to make their way. The world is changing so fast, it's hard to keep up – and a lot of it is scary: terrorism, the war on terrorism, global warming, looming oil shortages, bird flu, AIDS, drug resistant tuberculosis, mad cow disease....

Sure... a lot of what we hear is overblown or misrepresented, but there are many who think our economic systems are very fragile; who believe the energy shortage is real reason for alarm; who believe the larger systems of nature are seriously compromised; who believe that modern society is on the brink of collapse.

Could it be – really – that our world is collapsing? Like Rome? Like the Mayan civilization? Like Communist Russia, perhaps? It's happened before – some would say it is an inevitable cycle of life and of society.

Is it possible that OUR society, the wealthiest and 'smartest' in humankind's history, is on the brink of disaster? Really?

We've created so much – look at our cities, our transportation systems, institutions, bureaucracies, democracies, our shopping malls and sports arenas, our military? How could such a society be at risk? With all the tools of technology and communication we have, can we not solve our problems?

Well, while it's true that much of what we hear in the media is questionable, many of us have a sense that there are indeed troubled waters ahead.

Canadian Unitarian Thomas Homer-Dixon, a bright light in the Canadian intellectual scene, the author of *The Ingenuity Gap*, and Director of the Trudeau Centre

for Peace and conflict Studies at the University of Toronto, is one of the many who sees our society in decline. In a recent article, Homer-Dixon explored the reasons why complex societies like ours collapse.

Societies both ancient and modern respond to stressors by making their institutions and technologies more complex. For example, in ancient times a community hit by a drought might create an irrigation system to protect their food growing needs. This in turn would trigger the creation of a new layer of communal bureaucracy to make sure everyone follows the water-sharing rules.

In our own post 9/11 world, we can easily think of examples of new layers of bureaucracy and technology resulting from the stressor of terrorism; the Patriot Act in the US and its Canadian equivalent, the creation of the Department of Homeland Security, new passport requirements, air passenger blacklists and security measures. Most of these are American initiatives but few Canadians are unaffected by them.

There comes a point however, when making things more complex and interconnected becomes a liability. Not only does the law of diminishing returns kick in, but in a global community, a terrorist attack, a disease outbreak or a financial crisis on one side of the globe can have an immediate destabilizing effect on the other side of the world. The recent episodes of pet food and toys in America tainted by ingredients from China were not necessarily de-stabilizing but they show us how interconnected we are.

The world has become more connected and more economically efficient. But being more connected and more economically efficient has not solved our problems. In fact, the gap between rich and poor is increasing, our impact on the environment is not shrinking, violence and destruction through the use of technology is spreading, and the energy we need to keep the machine of our society is running out.

The stressors are building and converging, and are evident much closer to home. Many of our communities are suffering from the alienation, hopelessness and often poor education of our youth. Many of us adults are not functioning well because we are overwhelmed by apathy, dealing with unmanageable debt, depression or addictions, and local governments barely have the resources to keep the lights on.

There are two critical dimensions that lead to societal collapse –

- A convergence of stressors

- And a limited ability to cope

The title of Homer-Dixon's article is "Prepare today for tomorrow's breakdown." In other words, prepare to be in deep water – if you aren't already. Well, how prepared are we? As products of the Modern world in which science took on the role of solving problems, in which the American dream teaches us to 'go big or go home,' and in which consumerism conditions us to expect gratification ASAP, how eagerly are we going to prepare for trouble ahead? How good are we at coping? How likely are we to jump in the cold water?

As UU's, when we claimed our inherent worth and dignity, we gave up our sentence as sinners condemned to eternal suffering. We don't believe in Hell in the afterlife. But what about hell here on Earth? In British Columbia? In our own congregations, our own lives? What resources do we have to guide us through the dark night? Or to help our troubled neighbors? What are we practicing, and what are we teaching our children about coping with breakdown, loss, shock and suffering in life?

"Prepare today for tomorrow's breakdown."

While we need to listen to the ringing of alarm bells, we need not sink into the slough of despond. We can prevent breakdown from becoming a catastrophe by taking action; and that the way to do that is by making our economies, our technologies and most especially our communities...more resilient.

Not stronger, not more complex....more resilient.

If you haven't noticed this word coming into greater use lately, I think you will. Let us turn to Webster's dictionary, p. 1003...

Resilience:

1: the capacity of a body to recover its size and shape after deformation caused especially by compressive stress.

2: an ability to recover from or adjust easily to misfortune or change.

Resilience isn't about avoiding change or pretending it's not there. It means being able to cope, able to find ways to face hardship that are creative, that are life-affirming, that give us hope, and that help us time after time to endure.

Okay, so maybe things aren't so bad...but what do we really know? Well we do know that when the big systems go down, it's in our local communities that we will have

to deal with consequences, to find solutions. These are very practical things communities can do like growing food, sharing transportation, shelter, tools, skills. Activities like these provide alternatives when the systems we depend on become too risky. We don't have to look far to see people already working on these.

But if we are to navigate turbulent times successfully, there is another critical role that communities and congregations like this one have to learn to provide. Times like the ones we are living through are times of social fluidity. The rules and norms of society are changing and what once seemed an unquestionable truth is suddenly smoke and mirrors. It is a time when societies can be pushed into a new path, either for good or for bad. The struggle between civil liberties and protection from terrorism is one of many forks in the road before us.

UU's have a great legacy of social action. We have affected policy in the highest reaches of this country's governance. We have pushed American society into new paths for good again and again. But equally and perhaps more importantly, as communities of faith, as congregations, we play a vital role in setting the tone for how events unfold locally.

As social structures that have supported us crumble, we will need to find new sources of hope. We will need to find ways to re-orient ourselves when we are limited in ways we cannot fight. As leaders in our communities, and as a leading community within our communities, it is important for us as UU congregations to learn to deal with suffering and disorientation close to home, both our own and that of those around us and whom we serve.

First, we need faith. We need to remind ourselves again and again that crises and breakdowns can be doorways to renewal and regeneration. Bad things can motivate us to make changes we would rather avoid. And such changes inevitably bring unexpected opportunities. The Chinese character for crisis consists of the symbols "dangerous" and "opportunity."

Second, we need to learn to swim. Unfortunately, this involves – and there's no way around it – getting wet. It does actually involve jumping in the water, no matter how cold and uncomfortable. It means facing full on the harsh realities of our lives, and of our

way of living – the apathy, the debt, the addiction, the consumerism, and the denial that we really are in the midst of societal breakdown, and we too are part of the problem.

We need to learn to swim, to prepare for the experience of breakdown so as not to lose ourselves in chaos and despair, to keep our spirits and help those around us who are losing theirs.

In his work, mythologist Joseph Campbell explored the difference between a mystical experience and a psychological breakdown which might offer us some insight. He says that the problem is “to go through it somehow, even time and time again, without shipwreck; the answer being not that one should not be permitted to go crazy... but taught something of the scenery to be entered and powers likely to be met...”

“the one who cracks up is drowning in the water in which the mystic swims. You have to be prepared for this experience.”

Spiritual traditions speak of ‘turning.’ Of going into the darkness and finding light. Of being lost and then found. Of surrendering and being resurrected, of dying and being reborn.

We need to learn to swim in troubled waters, not to drown in them.

The third thing we need is community. The role of our faith communities in supporting and affirming our lives in times of trial is critical. The power of the group to generate courage and creativity is greater than any single individual. Let us learn to cultivate that power, courage and creativity, and to use it in new ways.

Let us learn to face our suffering together in our communities rather than alone. Just as we gather to worship, to celebrate, and to mourn, let us also to gather to suffer together. This may seem ridiculous and counterintuitive, especially with our cultural conditioning to avoid such uncomfortable things. But in experiencing our suffering together, we realize we are not alone. By voicing our concerns to one another, it is possible to realize that we suffer – not because we are alone and separated from life, but exactly because we are a part of it, because we are woven in the fabric of all earthly life. And when the fabric of life is being torn, we will feel the pain. By knowing the pain, we know we are reconnected, and part of the interdependent web once again. We renewed, our energy rises and we find hope again and again.

This is how we can help one another find peace and purpose when life outside these walls is in flux and turmoil. This is how we can make our churches into places for healing and transformation, for recovery and balance. This is how we can provide for ourselves and for others something to live for. This is how we can keep swimming when ‘God is troubling the waters.’

Rebecca Parker, President of Starr King Unitarian Universalist seminary, says:

“The times we live in demand something of us. In fact, I believe they demand more from us than many of us ever expected. One of my friends says, “Everyone likes to have the best asked of them.” I believe that we are living in a time when the best is asked of us, and this best is far beyond what we thought we were capable of or what we thought we would ever be asked to do. I believe that in rising to the occasion of what is asked of us now, we will discover a depth of strength and a richness of love and courage that we did not know we could claim or achieve. I believe that in rising to the challenge of our times we will wade into the mystery of life to a depth we did not know was available to us.”

Parker asks, “How shall we meet the challenge?”

I believe the opportunities for freedom are here among us, truly. Let us seize the day.

Let us wade into the mystery with compassion and insight, ...

With honesty and dedication,

With faith and forgiveness,

And let us learn to swim.