

March 6, 2016  
The Fourth Sunday in Lent  
The Rev. Tom E. King

Most of us, at one time or another, have experienced spiritual upheaval in our lives: times when spiritual distress appeared, either as a gradual and quiet unrest or as the trauma of a sudden crisis.

Whether this unrest or upheaval comes gradually or suddenly, our task is the same: to sit with it, to take it seriously and to look for wisdom that will serve us well in the future. The difficult moments in life are always lessons waiting to be learned. Because they make us uncomfortable, most of us would never volunteer or stand in line for the opportunity to suffer just so we could become a wiser person.

But even if we don't volunteer or stand in line, life offers us hardship over and over. In our eagerness to make ourselves feel better, we are tempted to ignore or turn our back on the wisdom upheaval presents us. When that happens, we miss a remarkable opportunity to learn the lessons hidden in our hardship.

The particular wisdom found in our spiritual upheaval is both universal and unique to our individual journey.

**One sort of spiritual upheaval is developmental, it signifies a transition of some sort; an indication that we are evolving from one place to another on our journey. This sort of upheaval typically comes on gradually and quietly.** We all know this one, to some degree or another. We notice it most when we are still and quiet, so we work really hard to stay busy and surround ourselves with noise. At times it keeps us awake at night. It feels like something is missing, or something is not quite right. Getting a new car helps for a while. Or a new job. Or a new relationship. Or a new toy of some sort.

But the distraction of something new is temporary, and the discomfort persists. If we ignore it long enough the symptoms may become exaggerated to get our attention. I will never forget a woman who sat in my office years ago, knowing she needed to end an abusive relationship that was hurting her severely. She cancelled an appointment because she had a doctor's appointment for the same hour, and came to her appointment the next week on crutches with her heels bandaged.

It seems that her feet had been bothering her a lot lately, especially her heels, and the pain was getting worse. The doctor could not figure out what was wrong, so he bandaged both feet and put her on crutches for a few weeks to see if that would help. Later in the conversation she made the comment, "I know I need to leave before I get

really hurt. I don't know why I keep dragging my feet." She got really quiet. We both looked down at her bandaged feet and broke out laughing. The light came on gradually, but it did show her what she needed to do.

The spiritual upheaval that is a quiet unrest usually warns us that we are dragging our feet. It is not always a warning that we need to make dramatic changes, but a reminder that we need to pay more attention to this discomfort. What is its source? What is it inviting us to see? To do? To understand?

Am I out of touch with my own feelings? Am I living out someone else's plan for me and not my own? Am I devoting my time and energy to things that matter? Am I using my energy to avoid things I don't want to see?

This unrest invites us to pay more careful attention to our deeper wisdom. If we ignore this wisdom long enough, the stakes can become high and the outcome can be dramatic. But if we pay attention along the way, the inner wisdom helps us keep our balance and find our path.

The spiritual task is to pay attention to our unrest, to our discomfort. What is keeping me awake trying to get my attention? What are those dream images that keep occurring over and over? Perhaps I should write down my thoughts and engage them in a private dialogue. Perhaps I should talk with someone I trust to help me sort them out. Perhaps I should reflect on these symptoms in my prayers and see if I can gain some wisdom there.

Gaining wisdom – that is the ultimate invitation of spiritual and emotional unrest. Often we have outgrown a set of ideas or beliefs, but don't know it. Or we have outgrown a coping strategy that helped us in the past but now causes more problems than it solves. Perhaps we are afraid of the very things that could help us most if we would just take a closer look – but taking a closer look involves courage and risk.

When we take a closer look we discover that the feelings we don't like and don't want to have are helpful. For example, temptation is much more dangerous if we ignore it than if we look at it and try to understand the motives behind it. What if we befriended these thoughts and feelings, and became curious about them rather than criticizing ourselves for thoughts and feelings we don't like? Who knows what we might learn??

**The second sort of spiritual upheaval is not so subtle.** It is usually sudden and traumatic. It kicks us in the face with little or no warning.

The sudden death of a loved one; betrayal by someone you love; a life-threatening illness, financial devastation, or a public tragedy like 9/11 or a tsunami.

Two images come to mind when I think of the spiritual crisis that comes from a sudden trauma. One is the image of a tuning fork. Remember the tuning fork from elementary school science class? A piece of steel shaped like a block letter y. You hit it with a mallet and it vibrates forever.

Throughout my years as a priest and therapist I have met many people who reminded me of a tuning fork. They had been hit by life really hard, and they were still vibrating when they got to my office. We wanted to make the vibrations stop, but we couldn't. The vibrations slowed down and stopped when they were ready to stop, not according to anyone's schedule or choice. When life hits us so hard we can't quit shaking, we have a spiritual crisis. Many of us know what that is like.

The other image of a spiritual crisis is a cartoon picture. You have seen it, someone being run over by a steamroller, flattened like a pancake, wondering if our natural shape would ever return. Life is never the same again; we are never the same again. The loss is overwhelming and never goes away.

Over the years I have witnessed a wide range of reactions to life crises, and I have been surprised at my own reaction to upheaval on a couple of occasions. The variables affecting how a person will react to trauma are numerous and complex. None of us know how we will react when hardship hits. We don't know how the world will look when shock and denial eventually fade away and the full weight of trauma sits on our chest.

In some cases I have seen people give up their faith and religion altogether in response to profound trauma. Like all of us they had a view of the world that felt pretty dependable until something unexpected overwhelmed their view of the world. Their worldview didn't allow for uncertainty; it did not allow for bad things to happen to good people. And most of all it did not allow for bad things to happen to them. They felt cheated, betrayed, abandoned by God, and were through with the whole religious endeavor from that moment on.

I think it is really important to respect and not judge people who have come to this conclusion. When we are kicked in the head or run down by a steamroller, we do whatever is necessary to survive. And if God can no longer be in our life's equation, I feel sure God understands, and so should we.

I have also known people whose religious and spiritual life became deeper as the result of a crisis. Their loss was just as great as those in the first group who gave up their faith. Their trauma was just as traumatic as those in the first group. But they came out

at a different place. They seemed to understand that life is uncertain, that faith and the religious life do not protect us from hardship.

They know firsthand the sorrow too deep to imagine. They know about falling through the air and wondering if they will ever land on solid ground again. Or if they land so hard they will just shatter when they hit the ground.

These people were just as shocked and surprised by trauma as those in the first group. But the trauma did not clash with their view of the world and how it works. When these people could not fit their life crisis into their existing worldview, they did not give up on their worldview. They expanded their worldview.

From a spiritual viewpoint, that is the hope for all of us: to let spiritual upheaval expand our worldview. To engage spiritual upheaval in a way that enlarges us rather than diminishes us.

We may come out of upheaval with more faith. We may come out of upheaval less clear about our faith. We may come out of the upheaval with no faith at all. What is important is to come out of the upheaval a more authentic person.

If we come out of upheaval or crisis as a more authentic person, if we become larger and wiser people, whether we know it or not, we are spiritually enhanced: spiritually enhanced because acquiring greater wisdom and depth is what the spiritual life is all about.

Lent 4: 2016      Tom E. King