

Some of you may know that Susanna and I got lucky and pulled a permit to raft the Green River through central Utah. The trip is 84 miles through remote wilderness. Other than by raft or canoe, physical access to the river is limited. There are couple of 4 wheel drive roads and a few pack trails. About half-way down, there's a field large enough to land a small plane. There is no cell service, and no internet. Once you leave the launch site, you are on your own, isolated from the world.

Embarking on such a wilderness trip safely requires good equipment, training, and experience. You never quite know what you'll encounter. Wilderness is not predictable. Between you and the takeout are many unknowns: the potential for accidents, wild animals, and the whims of the river. What awaits you at the other end is also unknown.

I'm thinking specifically of a number of trips down the Colorado River through the Grand Canyon that launched just before the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic. They emerged into a world very different from the one they left just a few short weeks before. There was no transition, no warning.

Just the drivers of the pickup crew saying, "Better sit down, we've got something to tell you about the new world that awaits you."

Change is a curious thing. Or rather, how we process change is a curious thing. Too much change is unsettling, too little lulls us into complacency.

We most notice rapid changes, an untimely death, the arrival of a pandemic, an economic disruption, the sudden cloudburst. We notice changes when there is a gap in the timeline, like a niece we haven't seen in years who is suddenly all grown up. Gradual changes tend to sneak up on us, and can catch us out, if we aren't paying attention.

Change was very much on our minds the last day of our trip as we approached the takeout. What would the world be like now? What would have changed, if anything? What miracles, what disasters, might have occurred in the week we were gone? Would civil war have broken

out? A vaccine for the virus found? The Second Coming of Christ? An alien invasion? Or just more of the same?

Which is what we encountered. The highways full of RV's, Moab swamped with tourists, lines at the gas stations, a typical early summer in the Canyonlands.

But underneath it all was an edginess, a hint of belligerence, a touch of defiance.

Not a cloud in the sky, but it felt like storm clouds gathering on the horizon. A change in the air, the faint scent of rain, the pressure dropping. Big weather on the way.

An old era is passing. Past ways of making sense of and ordering the world are no longer working, and something new is coming.

Now, what that is remains to be seen. There's a lot in play. Climate change, population stresses, economic and technology shifts, political realignments, ecological collapse, social change, and long overdue justice. We are entering what may be the most dynamic time in human history.

Those who see or sense this coming really want things to play out their way, but I don't think this is possible. It's all too big, and not something that can be controlled by mere mortals or their governments or corporations. Kind of like Mother Nature. Anyone who tells you they are driving this bus is either a fool or liar.

This great systemic change is going to reach into every nook and cranny of our lives. There's no hiding from it. Things are going to very unsettled for a long time, until a new stability emerges.

Which brings me to a lovely and very practical saying from Sweden.. something taught to every child from an early age.

There's no such thing as bad weather, only the wrong clothes.

Swedish parents want their kids outside every day, and while they can't choose or change the weather, they can teach their kids to put on appropriate clothing, their rain jacket or snow suit, and get outside and play.

For adults, the lesson is similar.

No such thing as bad weather, only the wrong gear, the wrong preparation, and the wrong attitudes.

On the river, as in life, accidents happen, injuries occur, and things break. In these situations, waiting for help or rescue is not always an option. You must be prepared to fend for yourself and those on your team. Over many years on the river, we've had to deal with head traumas, twisted ankles, near drownings, anaphylactic shock, punctured rafts, hypothermia, serious infections, encounters with bears, and a host of other situations.

And a drugstore first-aid kit and a tube of superglue just won't cut it. You need – no, you require – the best you can afford. And the best repair kit or first aid kit won't do you any good if you don't know how to use them.

There are skills born of experience and training: how to safely run rapids, how to rescue in swift water, how to right a flipped raft weighing half a ton or more.

And more dangerous than not having or knowing any of these can be attitudes: toward the river, toward each other, and your own belief that you and those you travel with can meet whatever comes up. The wrong attitudes can kill you just as certainly as drowning.

I relate all this because I think we are all heading into the storm-tossed unknown, and there are questions there for all of us.

What is the right gear? How do we prepare? What are the attitudes that will get us through?

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Here in the American west, rivers like the Green and the Colorado cut deep canyons through time. They start in younger strata – mere millions of years old – and cut their way down into older rocks, perhaps a billion years old.

But sometimes we encounter strata that have been jumbled and folded and fractured and transformed by heat and pressure, where ancient layers lie exposed on top of younger rocks, revealing deeper secrets out of turn.

History is a little like that. Things we thought were buried and forgotten suddenly emerge into the light.

It's a privilege to enjoy a certain amount of political and economic predictability in our lives, the steady paycheck, the stable job, perhaps some savings to fall back on, a bit of government support. This a privilege not always present for many in the past and many in the present, where a missed paycheck or a unforeseen medical bill is a real disaster.

That privilege has rarely been the norm. The storms of history make that clear.

If your ancestors – like mine – came from Europe, they lived through years of wars that swept back and forth across the landscape, bringing disease and disaster. The men were conscripted or killed by whatever army happened to be passing through, the women raped and abused, the harvest and animals seized, because that was how armies fed themselves. This went on for hundreds of years, and is deeply etched into the European psyche.

That trauma and behavior was exported to the Americas and the rest of the world. It marked almost every interaction with the indigenous peoples and the enslaved. It was repressed and buried under the American mythos and the passage of time is again revealing these rocks upon which our society is foundering.

Conflict and political and economic instability have been the norm throughout much of human history. Long periods of stability and predictability are the exception, and we seem to be returning to the norm.

Which is not necessarily a bad thing. I'm reminded of a story from years ago, about a young man who bought a fancy new van – you know, one of those vans with the captain's chairs and the little fridge and table. Cruise control was just being introduced, and it had that too.

He took that van out on the highway, got it up to speed, set the cruise control, and went in back to have a Coke and a snack. Things were fine as long as the road was straight, but as soon as the van hit that first curve... well, you can pretty much guess what happened. Kid was lucky to survive, but he did. Probably because he was so relaxed.

True story, by the way.

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I've always been very suspicious of the phrase "It's different this time." Because mostly it isn't and things seem to turn out in pretty familiar ways.

But for the first time in a long time, I'm thinking that maybe it might be true. It is different this time, partly because of the complexity and the scale of what's coming, but also because the world is more different than anything in the past. Human nature hasn't changed, but we are connected and interdependent in more ways than ever before. So far that seems to have amplified our worst, but may also amplify our best. That remains to be seen, but the hope is there as we embark upon these unknown waters.

Let's turn off the cruise control and start asking each other the necessary questions.

What is the right gear? How do we prepare? What are the attitudes that will get us through?

I don't have answers, but over the years I've learned a couple of things:

The first is that the circle is far wiser than any one of us alone. You need a pack, a team, a pod, a caravan - to travel with and be wise together. Trust, communication, and generosity are key.

The second is that it's important to start out joyfully, even if you don't know quite where you're going or how you'll get there. We create the destination by traveling.

May it be so.

Stormy Weather
Rev. Munro Sickafoose

Unitarian Congregation of Taos
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