“The Question Box”
Rev. Gary Kowalski
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Happy New Year. Tomorrow begins the festival of Succoth or the Feast of Booths as it’s also known. Having greeted Rosh Hashanah and grappled with the moral reckoning of Yom Kippur, this for Jews is the season of harvest as our astronomical calendar shifts from summer to the autumnal equinox. The observance goes back to ancient times, when the Hebrews were an agricultural and pastoral people, closely tied to cycles of rain and sun. Somehow the Jews have survived across all these centuries when so many other cultures and civilizations faltered or faded. They’ve survived by celebrating. Because rituals and shared stories are one of the ways people maintain their identity and purpose despite calamity and the vicissitudes of time.

People come together, as we do now, this morning, to remind themselves of who they are, where they’ve come from, and where they’re going.

Succoth represents an in-between, a no man’s land, a state of being unsettled, neither here nor there. For Jews, the season memorializes the period of wilderness wandering, when their ancestors lived in temporary huts, with no fixed abode. We, too, are living in such a moment, when the lifestyles we once considered “normal” are less and less viable. The world is in flux. An old order is passing and a new one not yet born. Anxiety is part of the landscape, yet we also sense this is no time for caution or half-measures. Resolve and worry. Anticipation and fear. These were the mixed emotional currents behind the two questions I received this past week.

The first from Bob Aubrecht:

May I suggest a possible subject for the service? With the emergence of the Delta COVID-19 variant and the need for all of us to be careful - both for ourselves as well as all around us - the topic of resilience in the face of adversity would be a helpful one for our members and friends. I know I had this expectation that with vaccinations well

underway in Taos and NM, our lives would return to some form of "normal" over the course of the summer and fall months. "Not so fast" as the phrase goes.

With the likelihood of booster vaccines coming soon and the return to masks and social distancing, we all need "put our heads down" and continue the work - and it is work - of a community-based approach for the coming months.

And these musings from Gael Minton:

In one sense, everything is so difficult now and the need so great to stay present—to be whole and useful—urgent. The two most important books Ty and I have read and re-read this past year: Another End to the World is Possible *by a French Trio/Pablo Servigne et al and* Deep Adaptation—Navigating the Realities of Climate Chaos *by a British Duo/Jem Bendell & Rupert Read prompt my question:*

How can we, in Taos and in our Unitarian community, prepare for coming societal disruptions and collapses? Would it be realistic to explore Joanna Macy's Work That Reconnects *with people working in a group to explore ways to be active participants in a new life-sustaining society?*

Bendell proposes 4 questions without answers:

What do we most value that we want to keep and how? (Resilience)
What could we let go of so as not to make matters worse? (Relinquishment)
What could we bring back to help us in these difficult times? (Restoration)
With what and with whom shall we make peace as we awaken to our common mortality? (Reconciliation)

What questions!

According to legend, the Jews wandered for forty years in the desert, but I suspect we may be in the metaphorical wilderness even longer than that, a century or more, when the vital signs and systems that were stable for so long (economic, social, and political systems) are in fluctuation--defibrillating--but where a new rhythm as is waiting to emerge (emergence being one natural outcome of emergencies).

Covid has been a harbinger of things to come. The virus itself should have been no surprise. There have always been plagues and pandemics. They came and went and this one will probably eventually go as it mutates into less virulent strains and as the hosts slowly gain immunity through vaccination or mortality. But novel infections and especially zootic transmissions are more likely with deforestation and human encroachment on the natural environment. Coronavirus, HIV/AIDS, and Ebola are just recent examples of diseases that have crossed the species barrier. For as *homo sapiens* invades every corner of what were once wild places, we inherit the pathogens that go with them.

Hard times are coming as our planet begins to feel the effects of climate change, of water and resource scarcity, of hotter summers and expanding deserts, of rising seas and bigger storms, of failing infrastructure and cultural disruption. Covid offers a preview of a world more volatile and turbulent than the one we've known. The new normal will be abnormal. There will be no sudden or catastrophic collapse, I predict, but more widespread and local shortages like ones we've seen, of toilet paper, oxygen, hospital beds, and other amenities that have become necessities in the developed world. Travel will become more difficult. Supply chains--including the petroleum dependent links in our food supply--will start to fray.. Avocados or lemons may become more valuable than Bitcoin. Unless you can buy an island, money and gated communities will offer less and less protection against our common predicament. For as the French agronomist and philosopher Pablo Servigne points out, we are no longer facing a problem that can be solved, but a predicament--like death or taxes--that can only be faced with resignation and despair or with creativity and resilience.

Bob is right, I think, in saying that resilience--the ability to adapt to difficult and changing circumstances--is a characteristic not so much of powerful personalities as of strong communities. What is it, after all, that enabled the Jewish people to endure for over three thousand years, though exile, through Roman occupation, through inquisitions and Christian persecution, through pogroms and attempted genocide--except an unshakeable, almost tribal loyalty? The Soviets tried to crush the Russian Jews but failed. Now that regime is in the dustbin of history. Because resilient communities are not like those of a totalitarian state that subsume and subordinate the individual beneath the collective. Rather they bestow on each person a sense of shared purpose that extends beyond any one lifetime. They enable men and women to believe that their personal, private narratives are part of some larger, more lasting, more important story. But the most resilient communities--like those of the Jews--foster commitments that go beyond mere tribalism or allegiance to the in-group. Like the Hebrews, who constructed the idea of a God who embodied universal standards of righteousness and compassion, resilient communities inspire more transcendent aims: to do justice, to love mercy, to walk humbly, to practice brotherhood and sisterhood, to establish peace.

I am not at all sure how resilient we are--either as a nation or a faith. For Americans, iIndividualism is part of our founding myth. Adam Smith provided the invisible hand guiding our economy, as John Locke was the genius behind our constitution. America has always been a nation of independent doers and thinkers and much good has come of it. Our forebears helped to invent the idea of self-government and the notion of human rights; we enshrined individual freedom to worship and liberty to speak out and dissent. Those values are close to the heart of our liberal religious tradition, of course, and they are values worth preserving. But recently we have seen the danger of an individualism gone berserk. Public health measures are denounced as tyranny. The idea of wearing a mask, not to protect oneself but to shield one’s neighbor, seems foreign and almost unpatriotic to many of our fellow citizens. As the world's only advanced nation without some form of socialized medicine, with no paid sick leave, we ignore the obvious facts that we all fall ill, that we are all only temporarily able bodied, that we all cope with depression and other mental crises at some point, that we all face

infirmity and old age. We have forgotten our scripture. “The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you,’ nor again the head to the feet, ‘I have no need of you.” For as Paul says and covid reminds us, we are members of one body and, if one suffers, the ailment afflicts us all. Americans need to relinquish the go-it-alone myth of hyper-masculine self-reliance which has so many destructive facets: the belief that more guns make us safer, that bigger cars get us there faster, that walls secure our borders, that nukes and drones can stop the endless wars.

Yet I’m not sure that we as a country possess those ingredients that make for solidarity in crisis: a shared story or a commitment to any ideal vision. We may have once been united, perhaps the last time twenty years ago on September 12, the week after the towers fell, but those days seem so long ago. Nor am I sure that our small denomination has any coherent narrative or plausible identity either. Since the time of Unitarian Universalist merger sixty years ago, our headquarters in Boston has sponsored numerous self-surveys and engaged more than one market research firm to discover what it is that UU’s actually believe or hold in common. We’ve redesigned our logo and floated slogans to present ourselves to the world, “Standing on the Side of Love” and “The Uncommon Denomination.” During those same years, the UUA has experienced internal feuds between Christians and Pagans, Theists and Humanists, and in 1968 a “black empowerment controversy” that almost ripped us apart. Historically, we trace our roots to the Pilgrims and the battlefields of Lexington and Concord, but now seem unsure whether to claim that heritage or run from it, whether to be proud or apologetic about who we are. Nationally, there are far fewer Unitarian Univeralists in 2021 than there were in 1961.

In my opinion, we may need to relinquish the UU label altogether, which never really described us, for we’re not primarily anti-Trinitarian or proponents of universal salvation. What we are is spiritually curious, non-dogmatic, comfortable with ambiguity, willing to learn from various traditions, and trying hard to live meaningful and useful lives as we contribute something to the larger world and coming generations. We’re determined to reckon with hard truths about racial injustice and economic inequality and environmental

peril while still acknowledging that it's a beautiful creation, well worth saving. And we're trying to do that in a small congregation where the anonymity of social media is replaced by living, breathing relationships, where kindness is real and life's loneliness is lessened. And where we can occasionally have some fun.

I don't know about Joanna Rogers Macy's *Work That Reconnects.* I read her other books years ago, *Despair and Personal Power in the Nuclear Age* and *The Council of All Beings.* I liked them okay but she had exercises that were rather intense like sitting silently and gazing into each other's eyes, imagining that this might be the last person you encounter before the final curtain drops. Or consider this: the next words you say could be the last you ever utter, the words your loved ones remember you by. It's a sobering thought, but it's hard to function continuously on that level. What I do believe is that congregations like this one can be part of the work of reconnecting, staying grounded and in touch with what matters, with work that matters, with relationships that matter, with the cycles and sometimes harsh realities of life. We are in a period of profound transition. But turning toward tomorrow I think the wave of the future will be small scale and decentralized, like this religious community, which doesn't depend on Boston for its vitality or well-being. I think the migration to cities of the last hundred years will eventually reverse itself, particularly as urban centers on the coast are hit by rising water. I think the small towns that Dori and I drove through last month when we visited Vermont that seemed to have closed their doors and shuttered their businesses--places like Arkansas City, Kansas--will probably come back, and that more backyard gardens and farmers markets will compete with Whole Foods and the big monocultures that typify industrial agriculture. I think we'll continue to see birth rates decline but that there will be some true catastrophes along the way that we can't fully foresee: even bigger pandemics, for instance, like the one of 1918 that killed 50 million people. Those calamities, terrible in themselves, will also help shrink the population. I think our great grandchildren will inherit an earth much diminished in biodiversity but that they will love and cherish all the more knowing its extreme fragility. They'll never take a robin for granted. In a best case scenario, I think the global standard of living may fall--especially for Americans who consume far more than their share--even as our overall enjoyment of

life goes up. We'll learn to do without some things we thought we needed. But whatever befalls, there will always be congregations like this one, for we shall always need one another.

To close on this theme of community, here is a poem written for Succoth in a time of covid, by Rachel Barenblat, titled "Far Away So Close."

In any other year
I would fill this sukkah
with friends. When Sukkot falls late
they know to bring a jacket
and wear fingerless gloves
to cup around hot mulled cider
beneath the rustling cornstalks
and the full moon.
This year we wave to each other
from across the street.
If only we could sit together.
If only we could embrace.
How can I welcome Abraham
and Sarah, David and
Rachel, when I can't welcome
my own neighbors?
The channel between us
— pixels on a screen —
only goes so far.
God Who accompanies
in this isolating wilderness,
connect me with the beloveds
I can't invite in, this year.