

“The Wildest Ride”

The brochure the woman handed me
Said there were at least nine “extreme thrill” rides at this particular park –
One roller coaster with three upside down twists,
One coaster that took you up at ninety degrees and down at ninety degrees
Before doing a full loop at 50mph.
One spinning contraption that swung you in circles back and forth
called the “*Extreme Frisbee.*”
And a few others with equally telling titles designed
To help you question your breakfast – *The Psychodrome, The Turkish Twist,*
The Yankee Cannon Ball, and *The Wipeout.*
I sometimes wonder what God would say if she or he (in this church you get
To pick your pronoun)
Is watching us from above as we strap ourselves into these rides.
“*You know, I think I might have made them a little crazy.*”

“*Hey kids,*” Karen and I say, after doing a couple of these rides
Right after we arrived.
“*How about we do the Antique Cars ride, you know where you get to drive
at 3 mph.*
In a lazy circle!”
Never mind that we just spent an hour and half in a car getting there,
in full-on traffic;
never mind that these antique cars have actual horns that won’t...(honk)
stop...(honk)...honking.
“*Boring!!*” they say.

And then their heads turn to the left, and they raise their arms to the sky,
Pointing their fingers.

“Forget the boring cars; let’s do THAT ONE!”

And I follow the line of their pointing fingers, across the open blue sky,
across the scene of two hawks soaring, across the tips of tall fir trees
Until my vision is interrupted by a strikingly high white tower.

‘What’s that?’ I say, as I notice at the very top legs dangling,
The bottoms of feet swinging.

“It’s called the Starblaster,” says my sweet little daughter
Who loves American Girl dolls and all things fashion,
But who turns into a complete daredevil at parks like this.

*“It’s called the Starblaster...I saw it on it the ipad....
You strap in and then you.....”*

But before I can hear more about what it’s involved, and before I can watch
The ride for myself, I feel myself being drug by both kids,
Mom somehow is left alone because she says she has to ‘hold stuff,’
And there I am brought to the front of the line, because there is no line -
Why is there no line for this? I’m thinking? –

And then I hear the screams from above, getting closer, getting closer,
And then the hiss of hydraulic brakes,
And then right in front of me the row of astonished faces,
Hair frizzed out (a problem I won’t have), eyes watering,
Mouths in the shape of an ‘oh my gosh.’

‘Yeah, our turn!’ says my 9-year-old.

‘Let’s do this!’ says my 12-year-old.

And now let us recall the words of our poet this morning;

Who says to us:

*I will not live in fear
of falling or catching fire.
I choose to inhabit my days,
to allow my living to open me,
to make me less afraid,*

And so I am led to chair number 2,

Child on either side,

Strapped in, shoelaces double-knotted,

Right hand holding the 9-year-old hand,

Left hand holding the 12-year-old hand,

Deep breaths,

And then over the speakers comes the Barry White male voice –

Welcome to the Starblaster! Are you ready?

Well, even if you aren't,

Here is your countdown: 5, hands squeeze tight around my hands;

4, how did I get here?

3, silence, waiting.

2, silence, waiting.

1, the hands squeeze harder. Daughter yells, son yells, in unison

Advice that applies to moments more than just this one: “Hold On!”

Silence, waiting, hiss of hydraulics, and then...

BLASTOFF!

Up, up, up, up, up.....at what felt like a thousand miles an hour.

And now I want us to pause here – let’s leave me and the kids blasting up, eyes wide open, mouths in the shape of an ‘oh my gosh’ (accept that’s not

what I said)

Hands squeezing hands –

and let's talk some theology together,

because theology is naturally what comes to your mind

as I tell you this story, right?

Well, it could,

Because one thing our UU faith is built on, going way back

To the time when our forefathers and foremothers longed

To resist the Christian faith of the time that painted people

Inherently 'fallen' and 'sinful' and in need of saving,

Was a theology that taught God was a God of love and not fear,

A God who blessed us with gifts of inherent goodness and worth and skill,

Which we, in turn, are meant to use to use to improve ourselves

And the world,

All with the help of a little something we might call an old-fashioned

Protestant work ethic.

One of the mantras of the Unitarian church during this time, we're talking

Late 1800's, was: *Upward and Onward Forever!*

The Universalists gave sermons with titles like:

No hell! No hell! No hell!

In today's language, in our culture which has absorbed

Much of this theology, this is what it sometimes sounds like;

See if it rings a bell -

"God helps those who help themselves."

“See all this – big house, great job, beautiful family – I deserve it! I’ve earned it!”

“God Bless America! God bless me!”

“Don’t worry! Be happy!

‘Come on, pull yourself up; dust yourself off! Pull yourself up by your bootstraps!’

All sounds pretty good, doesn’t it?

All sounds great,

As long as the ride you’re on

Keeps on going up and up and up, right?

Too bad that’s rarely how it is.

Back to the Starblaster.

After a few seconds of full-on speed,

The hydraulics hiss again, the chairs brake hard,

The straps press into the flesh around the shoulders,

And we stop hard at the very tip-top;

Eye to eye with the soaring hawks,

Parallel with the tops of the fir trees,

The sun on the horizon,

All so beautiful if it weren’t so terrifying.

We hang there at the top, silent, waiting, hands squeezing.

Forget UU theology,

forget upward and onward forever,

forget the belief that promises we can’t fail

if we just work hard enough, love enough, sacrifice enough,

forget the poet who says *I will not live in fear of falling or catching fire.*

I know what's coming next.

What's coming next?

That's right – *the fall*.

Again, the kids yell in unison the words I need to hear,

The ones I want you to hear: "*Hold On!*"

And then the invisible hand holding us from underneath

Suddenly pulls away,

My heart rushes into my throat,

my stomach rushes into the place my heart used to be,

my mouth in the shape of 'oh my gosh'

as we begin to drop and drop and drop.

And so let us now pause here – leaving me and the kids falling,

Eyes closed, mouth open, hands squeezed –

And let's talk some more theology together.

Having just witnessed a couple weeks ago our Jewish friends

celebrate Yom Kippur,

which has them reflect on the ways they have fallen over the year,

fallen in their relationships, fallen in their life, fallen down

and made mistakes,

It has occurred to me this week that our faith –

this UU faith that you tell me is so liberating because

it doesn't take us on 3000 mile guilt trips into the desert

or require you to sit in a dark room and confess to the minister your sins –

is the only one, the ONLY ONE,

That doesn't have a tradition that asks us to confront honestly

The ways we fall,

and then offer us a way to get some redemption

And forgiveness and something like grace.

Publicly we tell each other and we tell our friends that this is what

Makes us so great, so wonderful –

“The minister, he doesn’t even make you feel bad

If you miss church!”

But privately, my friends, I know how lonely this makes you feel;

I know how lonely your pain is.

“Everyone looks so happy, ’ you tell me in your loneliest moments,

In the privacy of the minister’s office that is a kind of confessional,

But with more sunlight.

“Everyone looks so happy and perfect and the church looks like something

You see on a postcard or in one of those Hallmark movies...

So what’s my problem?

Why is my marriage failing?

Why is my kid failing in school?

Why didn’t I get the bonus at work?

Why can’t I get a job?

How come I can’t get a date to prom?

How come he doesn’t ask me out?

Why can’t I shake this depression?

Why does one drink turn into two and three and four?

How come I get so angry sometimes?

How come two hours after leaving church I hear myself

yelling things at my family I really regret?

Everyone else in the pew and on the street looks so happy and perfect.

What's my problem? Is this my fault?

Sound familiar?

When we live in a culture that tells us it's all up to us,
 When we have a theology that tells us our blessings
 Are in direct proportion to how strong our Protestant Work Ethic
 Might be,
 Then falling and failing can be lonely rides, indeed.
 Thank God that is not how it has to be.

Back to the Starblaster one more time.

When we left us the kids and I were falling
 At something like a million miles a second.
 Gravity is truly terrifying.
 Falling is terrifying.
 Nothing to do but trust the gods of hydraulics,
 Trust the hands that made this machine,
 Trust that the fear of this moment, the pain of this moment,
 Will have something more to teach more than simply
 What goes up must come down.

"Hold On, Dad!" Says Ella. *"Hold On, Ella"* says Emerson.

"Hold On, kids!" I say.

We're praying now, and as the grown-up between them,
 As someone who knows something about the rises and falls of life,
 The dizzying heights and the deep mistakes,
 I know it's a prayer we need not just for that ride, that moment, that
 morning,

But one we'll need to carry us through each and every day of our living,
Which is, of course, the wildest ride of all.

At the last moment, the earth rushing up to meet us,
the asphalt rushing up to meet us,
the brakes hit hard, the hydraulics hiss,
our weight presses into the chair,
the heart and the stomach go down into the waist,
the chairs slow, slow, slow...

Toes reach down, heels touch down,
Feet press flat against the ground, safe, sound, home.
"Hold on, Dad. Hold on."

So friends, here at the end a request; it might feel a little uncomfortable,
But operating under the premise that it's the church's job to comfort
The afflicted and afflict the comfortable,
Let me ask us to rise as we are able.
And now reach across to someone near you,
And hold a hand or put your hand on someone's shoulder near you
(I know it's cold season).
And let us pray together:

For those times in life when we find ourselves moving upward and onward,
When we're blasting off to who knows where and who knows how far,
When we're scared and excited and uncertain and full of anticipation ...
Please repeat after me: *Hold On!*

And for those times when our upward momentum
suddenly and unexpectedly stalls,
when we hear the hiss of the hydraulic brakes,
when despite our best effort, our strongest ethics,
our more intentions, we feel the ride we're on coming to screeching halt,
please repeat after me: *Hold On!*

And for those times when the invisible hand uplifting us
Drops away, when because of something we have done or haven't done,
Or because of something we have lost,
Be a dream, an innocence, a hope, a person we love,
And we find ourselves falling at a million miles a second,
The earth rushing, the pain building, the fear multiplying,
Please repeat after me: *Hold On!*

And finally for those times when the brakes of someone
Else's love slow us down, when this congregation
Slow us down, when whatever is God or Holy to you
Slow us down just enough to keep us from hitting bottom too hard,
For whatever and whomever helps us gently and softly and safely
Touch the ground again,
Please repeat after me: *Hold On.!*

May we be held by one another and by a grace that is larger than us all.
May we trust enough and care enough and love enough to not let go.
Hand in hand, heart and heart, may we walk softly on the ground.
Amen.

First Reading

Last month we focused our Theme for Spiritual Practice on Evangelism:

The Practice of telling your story;

And now with the leaves of the trees falling and the seasons turning

We find ourselves here in October with this theme:

Falling: The Practice of Getting Up.

This morning we bring two readings that help us

Introduce us to the theme.

The first is from my favorite Episcopalian Barbara Brown Taylor.

Alex Businger will read for us:

“If you have ever made a graph of your life –

Writing your birthday at the left side of a page and today’s date

On the right –

Then you are likely to note that the spikes in your pain

Bear some relationship to the leaps in your growth.

(For example), it was when your family moved for the fourth time

In five years that you learned to enjoy your own company months

Before you made new friends at school.

Or it was when your partner left you that you remembered what else

You were meant to do in your life besides staying together.

Or it was when the doctor called about the spot on your lung

That you finally made up with the sister you had been feuding

With for years.

These are not the ways you would have chosen

*To become more than you were, but they worked.
Pain burned up the cushions you used to keep from hitting bottom.
Pain popped your clutch and shot you into next gear.
Pain landed you flat in bed, giving you time to notice things
You never slowed down enough to notice before.*

*And this is because pain makes theologians of us all.
If you have spent even one night in physical or emotional pain,
Then you know what it can do to your faith in God,
Not to mention your faith in your own ability to manage your life.”*

Second Reading:

For finding this second reading we have Linda Crawford to thank,
One of our Covenant Group facilitators, who sent these words
To her group this week.

It is by the poet Dawn Markova and it will be read by
Peggy Homer.

I Will Not Die an Unlived Life by Dawna Markova

I will not die an unlived life.
I will not live in fear
of falling or catching fire.
I choose to inhabit my days,
to allow my living to open me,
to make me less afraid,
more accessible;
to loosen my heart
until it becomes a wing,
a torch, a promise.
I choose to risk my significance,
to live so that which came to me as seed
goes to the next as blossom,
and that which came to me as blossom,
goes on as fruit.

