

“it is what it is”

Sermon

When I first learned that UUAC has monthly spiritual themes, I thought, “great, this will make choosing sermon topics so much easier!”

What had not occurred to me was that it also meant I would need to engage with topics and ideas that I would rather avoid.

Like falling. And failing.

To explain why falling—and failing—are challenges for me, let me tell you a bit about myself.

I was born and raised in Michigan, which makes me a proud to be a Midwesterner. *(Incidentally, our music director, Joe, and I grew up about 25 miles apart in Michigan.)*

From my Midwest roots, I embrace being warm and friendly. I smile at strangers on the street—a practice that was not always welcomed when I lived in Cambridge or rode the “T.”

I’m also a middle child between two brothers. This inclines me to be a diplomat—to make nice amidst conflicts. Indeed, in my family, I was the “good” child—you know the one...

the child who kept her room clean,
did her homework without being asked,
and who generally annoyed her brothers
by being *sooooo* “perfect.”

Admittedly, in many ways I liked to be “good”.

Being good meant winning affection, admiration, and respect from many people—including parents and teachers.

But, it also meant that I became very uncomfortable—
ok, a bit terrified—
at being caught at not being good.

In other words, I became afraid of FAIL-ing...
of falling from my *perch* as the good girl.

Then, it happened.

I part fell, part dove into a place of brokenness and darkness.

Coming back from that place in my life... rising up
changed me,
and shaped who I have become today.

One of those changes has been to reframe how I think about the *falls in my life*.

I’m not convinced that all falling is failing.

Moreover, I fear that at least for some of us,
thinking of falling primarily as failing can be unhelpful
or, even worse, can be painful and disastrous.

To explain, let me describe two different ways of thinking about falling.

In the **first** way of thinking, life is understood as an extended effort to get it “right”—
or, at the very least,
to keep making progress towards being better.

This way of thinking can be pictured as a straight line aiming for best path.

If the primary goals are to
stay on the path and to keep moving *forward*

Then, FALL-ing is seen as a failure
to stay on track or
to keep making progress.

A great example of this way of thinking comes from the current TV show *Hell on Wheels*. (Something else to know about me is that I *love* to watch TV.) *Hell on Wheels* is a fictionalized account of the building of the railroad across the U.S. in the 19th century. The tension underlying all else in the show is the need for *progress*—to keep the railroad moving onward farther west.

But, of course, the progress of the train was never a simple straightforward line across the continent.

Rather, building the train faced
innumerable set-backs,
failings,
and falling behind.

Mr. Durant is the man responsible for communicating the progress of the train to investors and politicians back East. He

repeatedly lies and attempts to hide how badly building the track is falling behind schedule.

He is deeply afraid of being seen as a *failure*.

I use this example because I think we too often *inadvertently* think of our own lives in terms of a forward march of progress.

We set goals to make something better—

to spend less time working and *more* time with family;

to eat or drink less; to exercise more;

to be more organized;

to be kinder to the co-worker or classmate who is so annoying;

to volunteer more;

to be advocate more for an important political cause.

The list can go on and on with *endless possibilities* for making lives better

in the smallest and

in the most global of ways.

I am NOT saying that we should *stop* seeking to make changes in

ourselves, our families,

churches, communities,

or in the larger world.

But, I do want to challenge the way of thinking that says that our lives are simply

a march forward to progress,
to being better,
to being perfect.

Because, in this way of thinking,
any mistakes,
unexpected obstacles,
or set-backs that
interfere with forward progress
are seen as *FAIL-ings* that leave us *falling* behind.

We can be left wondering whether
we will ever “arrive,”
ever be good enough,
ever get it right.

On a straight-line approach to life and falling,
there can be very little room for mercy—
for compassion
for ourselves or for others
through the *complexities* of struggle and change.

Never able to be perfect, to get it all right,
we can be left feeling inadequate and invaluable.

We can never seem to do enough to make “it” better.

Afraid of failing, we can also become overly cautious.

We can become afraid of trying something new or

find that we are stuck in an unhappy situation that
we are too afraid to change.

Yet, our UU faith tradition exhorts us to respect the dignity of every
human person—including ourselves.

Rather than struggle with anxieties
about whether we are “good enough,”
the Universalist message is that we are *all*,
always already bathed in the Spirit of love.

We do not have to beat ourselves up
for falling,
for failing,
for not being perfect,
for not being the “good girl” or the “good boy”.

Or, as the poet Mary Oliver writes in our opening words,

“You do not have to be good.

You do not have to walk on your knees
for a hundred miles in the desert, repenting.”

Falling is not always failing.

So, a **second** way of thinking about falling is to see
falling as a part of the cycles of living.

I find that the first reading by Wendell Berry opens up a different way of
thinking about falling.

In the poem, Berry plays with notions of freedom, law, and movement. In our U.S. culture, freedom is often understood primarily in terms of freedom *from* laws.

To be free is to be without laws.

Yet, for Berry, the rain is free only by *following* the law of gravity and falling to the ground.

In this picture, falling is not depicted as a failure, but as an expression of being a part of the eco-system. Following the law of gravity, “the rain is free only in falling” ... and again as the water “rising into air.”

Within Berry’s poetry, falling and rising are part of a cycle of change. *Falling and rising are part of what it means to move within that way it is.*

Another example of this second way of thinking about falling is found in the second reading.

In this reading, Claire Dederer tells the story about watching a woman fall out of a pose in yoga class.

Do you know that feeling?

Maybe it was not in a yoga class
but on the *soccer* field when you missed the pass.

Or, simply *walking down a sidewalk* and tripping over some cracked concrete.

I'm sure that we could have some fun sharing stories of our more splendid (and embarrassing) falls.

But *more is going on* in this reading than a woman who falls.

For one thing, she is blind.

If you have attempted *balancing poses* in yoga,
or simply *standing on one foot* for fun,
then you will know that balance is
greatly aided by being able to *focus on a point* in the near distance.

As a sighted person, I can only imagine
the *added difficulty* of learning to stay balanced.

And yet, she takes the risk.

She shows up for class,
puts down her mat,
and gives it a try.

And when she falls,
she re-situates herself and rises back up.

What gives her the strength and courage
to show up,
to risk the failing,
and to rise up again after falling?

Dederer's short story suggests a multi-faceted answer.

Firstly, the woman is not alone. She has a *companion* whose eyes are upon her, watching and ready to help—to be the shoulder to lean on—should she be needed. And, of course, there is the response of the woman to her companion’s unheard words.

With a laugh. With a *laugh*,
the blind woman says, “It is what it is.”

It is what it is.

She accepts the falling. With a laugh, she accepts the falling and the need to rise again. To me, the *laugh is an essential clue* to the insight Dederer is attempting to portray.

Without the laugh, the words, “it is what it is”
can be seen as defeatist.

They are the words that accept a world
the “way it is” and
forfeit any possibility of *change*.

But, with the laugh, the words “it is what it is”
emerge as a *light-hearted*
acceptance of a process of learning.

The words convey a sense of peace
with a LIFE that includes
cycles of falling and rising.

Realizing that falling and rising are a part of LIFE
also shifts the calculus of risk.

Rather than being *terrified* of FAIL-ing,

of *falling* behind,
or of not being *perfect* . . .
accepting the experiences of falling and rising
as ***part*** of life
can help to give courage to live more fully.

In yoga, being a “good” yogini is not about how long you can hold the pose without falling.

Rather, it is about the practice of showing up to your mat to try again.

Some days... it is a lot easier to show up for yoga class . . .
or to work,
marriage,
parenting,
or activism
...than on other days.

But, that is OK.

Some days, some seasons of life,
things may be falling apart.
Sometimes we *do* make bad choices
that lead us tumbling down.
And, sometimes, to *no fault of our own*,
we cross a path and
are tripped
sending us falling down.

Even when our failings or the failings of another contribute to our falling, we are not failures.

Not all falling is failing.

May we not measure our worth and value
by how closely we manage to
follow the straight line
of being “*good*” or of making “*progress.*”

Rather, may we know that no matter how many times
we fall and rise... fall and rise....fall and rise,
that its **OK.**

It is what it is.

Like the wild geese and the falling rain,
both you and falling
have a “*place in the family of things.*”

I am not trying to make light of the very real *pain* that can come with
falling.

As I know too well,
Falling can hurt.
It can damage our *bodies*,
our *spirits*,
our *relationships* with those we love.

Falling can land us
in places of brokenness and darkness.

Certainly, sometimes rising is easier than at other times.

But, I believe, that rising is always easier when
rather than see it as our failure to live life in the “Right” way,
we can accept falling as part of *living*.

As the wild geese return in spring
and the water rises again to the sky,
may we have faith in the cycles of falling and rising.
May we find companions—such as those beside us here—
to be a *shoulder to lean* on when we need help rising.
And, may we find within ourselves
the laugh of the blind woman to say,
“It is what it is.”

Amen.

First Reading

The Law that Marries All Things

by Wendell Berry

1.

The cloud is free only
to go with the wind.

The rain is free
only in falling.

The water is free only
in its gathering together,

in its downward courses,
in its rising into the air.

2.

In law is rest
if you love the law,
if you enter, singing, into it
as water in its descent.

3.

Or song is truest law,
and you must enter singing;
it has no other entrance.

It is the great chorus
of parts. The only outlawry
is in division.

4.

Whatever is singing
is found, awaiting the return
of whatever is lost.

5.

Meet us in the air
over the water,
sing the swallows.

Meet me, meet me,
the redbird sings,
here here here here.

Second Reading

Selection from Claire Dederer

Poser: My Life in Twenty-Three Yoga Poses

The blind woman kept falling out of the pose. Her friend stood by, not really doing anything, just hanging out. The blind woman would fall to the side, and the friend would stand, unmoving, unflinching, a slight smile on her face. You would never have known she was helping out a

blind person who was tipping over. Unless you looked at her eyes. Her eyes were constantly scanning her friend, making sure she was OK.

The blind woman seemed untroubled by her falls. She rearranged herself on her mat, stood up tall, visibly took a breath, bent her leg, grasped her foot, and expanded once more into the pose.

Her friend quietly asked her a question, and the blind woman shook her head and laughed and her answer filled the room: "It is what it is."