

“Timelines”

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Stephanie May

First Parish in Wayland, online

March 29, 2020

On the first Wednesday of March, I was out to dinner at a local restaurant with a friend, slurping oysters and sipping a drink.

On the second Wednesday of March, the Parish Committee, our board, sat widely spaced around a table as we decided to close the building and move services online.

On the third Wednesday of March, the Lay Ministers and I hosted the first of what may become many online Mid-Week Check-Ins.

And, then, on the fourth Wednesday of March, I began making arrangements for an online memorial service. An event I hope will be rare, but fear may not be.

This is not the timeline I anticipated for March, 2020.

I suspect we all have similar stories of altered timelines for our lives. For some of us, the arrival of the coronavirus pandemic amplified our responsibilities. Teachers are learning how to conduct class online. Working parents are navigating between homeschooling kids and, perhaps, continuing their own work life online. For others of us, the sudden cancellations have left the days at home feeling long and even somewhat empty. While some choose to slowdown in the newfound space, others tackle dormant projects or dive into new ones like sewing face masks.

What is true for *all of us* is that the pandemic has ruptured our expected timelines for our days, weeks, and months to come. This is more than simple cancellations of singular events or meetings. Rather, it feels as if time itself has folded in on itself—like the melting clock of a [Salvador Dalí painting](#). Days blend one into the other. Weeks feel like months. Months feel like a massive amount of time. A year is incomprehensible. In such a moment, how can we speak of timelines?

In reflecting about time and the pandemic, I found insight in a Facebook post from Kotatsu John Bailes, a former colleague and a Zen Buddhist priest. [Bailes writes](#):

*We are now grieving the loss of loved ones and the rituals of our once everyday lives.
We are grieving our very understanding of past, present and future. Not only is the*

future not going to be what we thought. The present and past have not been as we thought. Yes, a past occurred. Yes, a present is occurring. Yes, a future will occur. We thought that, within a certain range of possibilities, things would be as we planned. Now we cannot even hold to that illusion. Where do we turn?

The pandemic wounds our very understanding of time. Our past does not seamlessly move to our imagined future. Instead we are here, holding the fragments of our shattered timelines like the bits of a burst balloon. Impermanence reveals itself as the primal stuff of life. What do we do now?

With the loss of so much in our daily lives and of our anticipated futures, we are grieving. Such loss and grief are indeed reminding us of all that is impermanent. We can lose our hugs from grandchildren or grandparents; we can lose our freedoms to move beyond our homes; we can lose our jobs, our businesses, and our confidence in paying our bills. The pain of this grief sharpens our awareness of what matters to us. In registering loss, grief reveals what we are grateful to have in our lives.

While it may be rare to experience such *global* turmoil, it is very common to have our lives turned upside down. In her book [*on living*](#), hospice chaplain Kerry Egan suggests every life encounters radical change at some point. Egan writes,

Every single person has some bizarre, life-shattering, pull-the-rug-out-from-under-you story in their past, or will experience one in their future. Every shopper in the grocery store, every telemarketer on the phone, every mother at school pickup, every banker striding down the sidewalk. ... Every one of us will go through things that destroy our inner compass and pull meaning out from under us. (p17-18)

What is your story? When have you had that *pull-the-rug-out-from-under-you* experience? And, perhaps most importantly, how did you find your footing and direction again? What meaning did you draw from that experience of ruptured expectations?

Egan is careful to explain that her book of essays is *not* a book about dying. Rather, she insists is a book about what the dying have taught her about living. At the end of life, writes Egan, what most people want to talk about is their families. In families, explains Egan, we learn about love—both the gifts of love as well as the pain and hurt of not receiving the love we craved and needed. In this way, talking about families is really a way to talk about love, about meaning, and, in some way, about God and questions of ultimate value.

We talk about our families, not because they are perfect, but because they are where we learn about love. In families, we learn about our need for love, as well as the pain of

disappointment in or even rejection by those we love. Hopefully, we also learn something about reconciliation and/or forgiveness. Egan writes,

“The spiritual work of being human is learning how to love and how to forgive. That work is the gift we give each other, for there is little in this world people long for more than to be loved and to be forgiven by their mothers and fathers, daughters and sons.”
(p30)

Could this also be our spiritual work now, in this moment of crises? Might this be a time where we engage in the spiritual work of loving and forgiving?

Living as we are in tight quarters with family or at a distance from loved ones, what are we noticing about these relationships in our lives? Are we more expressive with our love, perhaps reaching out more to those we call family? Are we missing those we have lost or those from whom we are estranged? How are we managing the conflicts with those whose paths daily cross ours, whose voices ring out in the next room, whose choices may impact not only their health but also our own? How are we responding to children aching to play with friends? How are we navigating our own longing for connection, for human touch?

Amidst all the new technical questions of whether or not to wash produce, how to log-on to Zoom, etcetera, I suspect that our lives are also vibrating with these spiritual questions of what it means to love in a time of coronavirus. [Yes, a weak allusion to *Love in a Time of Cholera* which I’ve not read.] Could it be that one of the most important long-term impacts of this crises will be the lessons of love we take from living closely with or apart from our families?

I want to acknowledge that “family” can mean many different things to people. For many, family is not limited to those to whom we are genetically related and/or with whom we grew up. Family can mean those we choose to rely upon and those we care for. Family can be simple; family can be complicated. Whatever your understanding of family, Egan suggests that for many talking about family is central to making meaning in our lives.

Along these lines, I want to pause and say that it matters more than I can say that my parents have been joining us online these last few weeks—at least until it’s time for them to log-in to their own church service in Michigan. In a similar vein, I was moved when one of you shared in the Mid-week Check-in that you wish your parents were here. That made so much sense. The love of family can be a source of meaning in a time of upheaval. And yet, I know others are struggling painfully in their family life right now. Long-simmering tensions between couples may be boiling over amidst added stresses. Even the

most patient parent may be finding their capacities stretched thin by the unrelenting togetherness. Added to these interpersonal conflicts is a current of existential fear for one's own health and the health of those you love—perhaps even for those causing you stress.

What we are living through is about more than technology, work patterns, and how we shop for groceries. What we are living through is making demands on us as spiritual creatures seeking to make meaning out of great uncertainty. Our impermanence is made clear. Our [biological vulnerability](#) is made clear. And, our connections to each other are made abundantly clear.

We do not live in isolation. We live in relationships with strangers who produce, transport, maintain, and sell all that we need to live. And, we live in relationship with our families—given and chosen. Faced with the disruption of our systems and our connections, we grieve our losses.

In his post, Bailes continues:

Allowing ourselves to grieve and to share this grief with one another will place us clearly in the present. A place right now, it seems, none of us want to be. The present though is the only place from which what we call the future can emerge.

We cannot change the past that led us here. Nor do we know the path forward to the future. Though we may not wish to be here, this present is our present. And the future will only emerge from what we feel, experience, and do in these moments.

In her poem, “The Past . . . The Present . . . The Future,” Nikki Giovanni also beckons us to notice where we can and cannot initiate change. In the opening stanzas of the poem, Giovanni recounts the suffering in the past of African American history. Then, she writes:

We cannot undo
The past we can build
The future

Where when we go to Mars we send
A Black woman
Because she will make friends and sing a song
With them
When we go to Pluto
Which will be again

A planet
We send Black children
To learn to ski

When we decide
It is time
To thank the Deity
For our food . . . our shelter . . . our health
We will all . . . no matter which
Ideology . . . wrap our arms
Around each other
And be glad we live . . . at this time
On
This Earth

Whatever the timeline of these coming weeks and months may turn out to be, may we today be present to our grief, our gratitude, and our love. May we pay attention at this time so that we may build a future grounded in what we are learning about our impermanence, our vulnerability, and our need for love, forgiveness, and compassion. May we imagine a future not of isolation but of arms wrapped around each other in love and life-giving justice.

So may it be
Amen