

“The Evergreen Stories”

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First Parish in Wayland

October 16, 2022

“It’s okay to not be okay.” Have you heard this said?

[It’s okay to not be okay.](#) It’s okay to not always be “fine” or “good.” It’s okay to struggle, to have a bad day, a bad week, a bad year. Not everything is always positive. We do not always need to feel like smiling.

Pretending otherwise can become a problem of its own. In rejecting what she calls “toxic positivity,” psychologist [Dr. Jaime Zuckerman](#) explains, “Not only is it okay to not feel ‘okay,’ it is essential. An abnormal emotional response to an abnormal situation IS normal. We cannot simply pick the emotions we want to have. It just does not work that way.”

We simply feel what we feel. Sometimes we are in a bad mood. Sometimes we are having a hard time adjusting to what’s just happened to us or around us. And sometimes what happens is out of the ordinary, abnormal, unexpected, and possibly traumatic. Times like March of 2020 when the governor declared a state of emergency, closing schools, businesses, and houses of worship. When the roads and the skies quieted. When pots and pans banged from apartment balconies in New York City. When refrigerator trucks idled outside hospitals as makeshift morgues.

In starting this new year, I so wanted everything to just be “fine” and “good.” Can’t we just *finally* put this pandemic behind us?!? Can’t we just turn off the cameras and all come back in person to services, to events and meetings? Can’t everything just be *normal* again?

It is so easy to hope for these things. It is understandable to *feel* this way, to long for what we remember as simpler, safer, less chaotic. And as someone who resists both Zoom and masks whenever I can, I sympathize with the longing to simply put the pandemic in the *past*. And, in some ways, the pandemic is past. At least, the part of the pandemic defined by global shutdowns and lockdowns, by closed offices and classrooms, and by the utter shock and total uncertainty about what was happening.

Indeed, enough time has now passed from that first year of 2020 that the books seeking to make sense of what we experienced have begun to arrive. We are beginning to have a sense of distance and perspective to name what did happen and what it may mean for us today and in the years to come.

In reading these accounts, I notice the word *trauma* appearing [again](#) and [again](#). As a [May 2022 article](#) in the Georgia State University Research Magazine explains:

The COVID-19 pandemic has been the most traumatic collective event of our lifetime. And after two excruciating years and more than a million deaths in the U.S. alone, it is still unclear when, or if, the pandemic will end. That uncertainty is one of many stressors, along with worries about health, family, work and finances, that have taken a significant toll on mental health.

In a recent survey, the American Psychological Association found that nearly two-thirds of respondents said their lives have been permanently changed by the pandemic. The report also showed that a large proportion of the country has been living in “sustained survival mode” with significant consequences for mental health. The World Health Organization says the pandemic has sparked a 25 percent increase in anxiety and depression worldwide.

We are not all okay. And that’s okay. What we’ve been through is wildly abnormal. Struggling with how to respond—in 2020 or in 2022—is normal too.

I notice I’m not okay in several different ways. For one thing, I’m more irritable than I used to be—my generosity of spirit perhaps worn a bit thinner. And even as I get annoyed by how others act unkindly or too quickly rush to judgment, I have to pause to consider that maybe others are also feeling a bit worn down and less flexible towards others as well. In fact, it was in just such a moment of reflective awareness that I decided to preach today’s sermon about the ongoing traumatic impact of COVID on our psychological, emotional, and spiritual health. As the saying goes, pastors preach the sermon they need to hear.

It’s taken me a long while to start to acknowledge the ways my life has permanently changed by COVID—and I’m pretty sure I don’t actually have it figured out yet. But what I do know is that I often cringe when I look at pictures of the years just before the pandemic. There I am smiling widely beside a friend in a crowded theater before a play. How ludicrous, I think now, to be so happy and oblivious to the ordinary gift of walking into a building to share space in a crowd of strangers without a thought other than how good our seats might be. And then I realize I am not angry at my younger, innocent self—I am still grieving and shaken by all that I lost, that we lost, when our lives were transformed by a microscopic virus. A virus that robbed us of community, of mindlessly sharing spaces with strangers, of comfortably moving through airports and office buildings, grocery stores and living rooms.

It has taken even longer to realize how my March of 2020 reactions were infused by prior periods of my life that had also felt chaotic and out-of-control—times like my brief marriage in my 20's which left lingering imprints from the fear I had felt in that relationship. Reading a passage from the book [The Stolen Year](#) by education correspondent Anya Kamenetz, I resonated with Jeannie, a teacher, who connects reliving her old traumas to the new trauma surrounding school lockdowns. She explains, “I’m reliving my mom’s divorces. This is what’s happening. This is why I’ve been crazy, because there’s no stability.” She then imagines how her angry neighbors and parents must also be bearing the weight of their own past traumas breaking into the current moment of chaos.

Jeannie’s story as a parent and teacher is but one of many in Kamenetz’s book about kids and COVID. From the impact of the loss of childcare to the compounding impact of COVID on kids already impacted by racism, she explores not just how the pandemic *created* problems, but also amplified the problems already in our social systems. In this sense, the pandemic simply showed us all what was already true—not everyone is okay.

So let me say it again, it’s okay to not be okay. We have been through “the most traumatic collective event of our lifetime.” To respond abnormally or ‘differently’ than we ‘typically’ do to events is a normal reaction to an abnormal event.

And while it is critical to name this shared reality, I do not mean to suggest there is no path forward. But it is to say that I for one do not want that path to be a golden brick road showered with sunshine affirmations that “everything is fine now.” Because the losses still hurt and my proverbial eyes are still adjusting to an altered perception of how to view the world.

In trying to make sense of things, stories have long been a tool for meaning-making. Journalists distinguish between current-event stories and evergreen stories. While current events grab the headlines and the rolling footer of cable news channels, evergreen stories are the content that endures year after year. [Evergreen stories](#) can also be those familiar stories that remind us of timeless truths—the kind of stories we often find told and re-told in religious traditions. For example, the story of Jesus feeding the multitude in the Christian scriptures.

In the story, a crowd of thousands has amassed in a remote area to listen to Jesus speak and teach. As any event planner knows, crowds create multiple challenges—including how to feed them all. Concerned, Jesus’ disciples approach him with the idea to disperse the crowd so they could find their own food in nearby villages. Jesus counters, “no...you give them something to eat.” The disciples are confounded and explain, but, uhm, Jesus we only have

five loaves of bread and two fish from this boy?!? (You can just imagine the disciples throwing skeptical glances at each other, can't you?) Perhaps with a sigh, Jesus asks the disciples to bring the food to him. Directing the crowd to sit, Jesus takes the fish and bread, looks to heaven, give thanks, and breaks the loaves. Passing the food back to the disciples for distribution to the people gathered, all ate and were satisfied . . . with multiple baskets of food remaining.

One explanation for this miracle is the idea of magically replicating bread or fish—like something out of *Harry Potter*. But my favorite explanation is that when the crowd witnessed the generosity of one boy willing to share his two loaves and five fish, they all responded by opening their own bags to share what they had brought.

This reminds me of the toilet paper shortages in March 2020. As shutdowns took hold and people rushed to stock up, suddenly toilet paper became a rare commodity, not a roll to be found on the sparse metal shelves of local stores. A call for help went out on our First Parish list-serv and a plan was hatched. A table was placed in the unlocked shed 12 outside. Those with rolls to spare would place the precious commodity in a bin. Those in need could come by and take what they needed. Suddenly, working together, we had what we needed. A COVID miracle!

While I speak in some jest, there is such profound truth in both stories. There is magic to be found in the power of community. Together we can find the sustenance we need and, perhaps, even the abundance. In generating fear of strangers, of crowds, of being in shared spaces, COVID stole community from us. Certainly we fought back—seeking to re-form community online and outside. But we still felt the trauma of that sudden loss of community just as we needed it most to weather the chaos of the pandemic. And if you are not feeling okay, that's okay. We have been through the most traumatic collective event of our lifetime. Healing is not going to be immediate. Healing will take time and, like all grief, it will come in stages.

While there is much that remains unsaid and unknown as we move forward in a world still facing many problems, what I do know is that there is magic in community. And, I believe that while our path forward may not be all sunshines and smiles, it will be a more sustainable path if we move forward together with others. So let us offer what we can and receive from others what they offer. Let us bravely name our losses and our trauma. Let us overcome the fear of others and rebuild communities of love, support, and, perhaps, even abundance.

So may it be. Amen.