



A sermon by F. Jay Deacon  
Preached at Unity Church of North Easton  
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I have used the word, “cataclysm.”  
And I should say what I mean by it.  
You will know, I think, what I mean.  
It comes unannounced and uninvited.  
It moves the ground beneath you and  
you are carried along without the slight-  
est ability to control its movement. It  
settles in front of you and absolutely  
changes the way things are for you. It  
tears the fabric of life; it dislocates your  
reality into unfamiliar patterns.

These cataclysms—don’t have much  
sense for timing. Just when . . . well,  
why *now*? It wasn’t *your* idea of how to  
spent this part of your life.

You seem suddenly to be sinking, into  
some dark place.

Now—We usually reserve a word like  
*cataclysm* for events that have a more  
cosmic scope, those ultimate global  
cataclysms.

It is entirely predictable that without  
some significant changes in the course of  
human affairs, our greed, our own un-  
willingness to change the way we live  
with this planet, our slowness to learn —  
will sweep life on this planet into an  
ecological cataclysm, before long. It’s  
predictable and preventable, but we  
seem driven towards some final horror,  
and when it comes, out of the skies

## THE READINGS

*Friedrich Nietzsche wrote:*

To those human beings who are of any concern to me I wish suffering, desolation, sickness, ill-treatment, indignities — I wish that they should not remain unfamiliar with . . . the torture of mistrust, the wretchedness of the vanquished.

*Will to Power*. Trans. Kaufmann and Hollingdale, Vintage, 1968, p. 910.

If you refuse to let your own suffering lie upon you even for an hour and if you constantly try to prevent and forestall all possible distress; if you experience suffering and displeasure as evil, hateful, worthy of annihilation, and as a defect of existence, then it is clear that [you harbor in your heart] . . . the *religion of comfortableness*. How little you know of human *happiness*, you comfortable people, for happiness and unhappiness are sisters and even twins that either grow up together or, as in your case, *remain small* together.

*Gay Science*, 338.

*Ralph Waldo Emerson,*  
*in his essay “Fate”:*

Though Fate is immense, so is power . . . Man is . . . a stupendous antagonism, a dragging together of the poles of the Universe. He betrays his relation to what is below him, — thick-skulled, small-brained, fishy — quadruped ill-disguised, hardly escaped into biped . . . But the lightning which explodes and fashions planets, maker of planets and suns, is in him. On one side, elemental order, sandstone and granite, rock-ledges, peat-bog, forest, sea and shore; and, on the other part, thought, the spirit which composes and decomposes nature, — here they are, side by side, . . . mind and matter . . .

’Tis weak and vicious people who cast the blame on Fate. The right use of Fate is to bring up our conduct to the loftiness of nature. . . . A [person] ought to compare advantageously with a river, an oak, or a mountain. He shall have not less the flow, the expansion, and the resistance of these.

’Tis the best use of Fate to teach a fatal courage. Thought dissolves the material universe, by carrying the mind up into a sphere where all is plastic. . . .

Fate, then, is a name for facts not yet passed under the fire of thought; — for causes which are unpenetrated.

Continued next page ➡

above us and the seas beneath us, we will not believe it is happening.



But I want to talk about the personal-sized events that disrupt our lives with the same kind of force.

There are things that lay perpetually in front of you and unnerve you — like getting old and realizing it.

One day each year I used to turn a year closer to 60 — but now, miraculously, each year I get farther away. Eugene Ionesco describes the realization of this rude disruption of life:

I can't explain to myself how I could allow myself to reach the age of 30, 35, 36. I don't understand how I could have failed to try to prevent this catastrophe. Did it happen in my sleep? Was I unconscious? Did somebody get me drunk? A REVERSE metamorphosis: I became a caterpillar. Whatever became of the person I was, the person I must still be, the frail child, the brand-new being, and even the adolescent who still had something from his childhood left? Where have I disappeared to? Where am I, for what I see can't be me: already pot-bellied, already a bit bald, covered with hair, a ripe, overly juicy fruit. I who had such a horror of the gelatinous flesh of mature men and women. Soon to be a quad-ra-genarian. How could the Good Lord ever have allowed me to get this way? I am in someone else's skin, in the layers of skin, and the folds of skin of someone else. I have personal knowledge of the following fact: one can become someone else.

For some folks, that's a cataclysm. It particularly unnerves us because we feel ourselves carried along toward the time when we are swallowed up in the cataclysm of dying.

There are others. We sink down into those dark places — you know, when you're looking for the light at the end of the tunnel, and finally you see it but it's a train.

There are emotional cataclysms: wrench-

*Doris Lessing won the Nobel Prize for Literature this week. In her space-fiction Shikasta, she describes the people of the Earth from the perspective of the far-distant future:*

Forced back and back upon herself, himself; bereft of comfort, security, denuded of belief in "country," "religion," "progress" — stripped of certainties, there is no Shikastan who will not let her eyes rest on a patch of earth, perhaps no more than a patch of littered and soured soil between buildings in a slum, and think: Yes, but that will come to life, there is enough power there to tear down this dreadfulness and heal all our ugliness — a couple of seasons, and it would all be alive again.

This, then, is [their condition] now . . . Nothing they handle or see has substance, and so they repose in their imaginations on chaos, making strength from the possibilities of a creative destruction. They are weaned from everything but the knowledge that the universe is a roaring engine of creativity.

ing change in relationships, the loss of something or someone who had seemed to nourish the very springs of your being and now he or she will not be there for you. Or the disappointed hope of a love that never shows up.

The end of a hope. The end of a road.



It sometimes feels as though life has gone to some channel you don't much like and you cannot find the remote. There was something you wanted. It isn't just that you *wanted* it. It is that we believe ourselves entitled to have it. What is happening is wrong and unfair.

These incidents come in various sizes and varying degrees of seriousness. Sometimes it's something that is, in fact, pretty trivial — an inanimate object that has chosen to fight you, like a computer: one is being purposely frustrated by a machine that holds one in contempt. Or it might be something like, say, a river.

There was a Persian king, Cyrus, who had built a great empire and had now declared war on yet another kingdom — this time Assyria — and set out with his army for the Assyrian capital, Babylon, to conquer them, too — on his favorite white horse. Ah, how fine he looked on that white horse. They'd marched toward Babylon and were camped by the Gyndes River when King Cyrus' horse wandered into the river, which happened to be swollen by winter rains, and tried to swim across. The tide was too strong and horse didn't make it. So Cyrus delayed his march for an entire summer and divided his army into digging crews who turned the mighty river into 360 pathetic little channels. Only after he had thus punished the wicked river did he march on to Babylon.



Or those wilderness wanderers I spoke of last week — fleeing a place that was too small for them, yet they're still pining for it, those Exodus journeyers, wandering around the wilderness for forty years kvetching, even though it just doesn't take forty years to cross that territory.



But then moving through such a time is not the same as moving *into* it as though it is supposed to be a permanent home, living out a permanent tragedy, never moving beyond the cataclysm. But before we can move beyond it, we must pass through it.

Nietzsche had words for the kind of religion that *avoids* suffering:

If you refuse to let your own suffering lie upon you even for an hour and if you constantly try to prevent and forestall all possible distress; if you experience suffering and displeasure as evil, hateful, worthy of annihilation, and as a defect of existence, then it is clear that [you harbor in your heart] the *religion of comfortableness*. How little you know of human *happiness*, you comfortable . . . people, for happiness and unhappi-

ness are sisters and even twins that either grow up together or, as in your case, *remain small* together.<sup>3</sup>

Pain must be allowed to be pain. It brings a time for listening. Listen and hear. Illusions are torn away. New vision comes, and, new necessities. Maybe a renewed understanding of your life's dream, and a new commitment. A recognition that there is a price to pay before corners are turned.



Now I don't know what you call it. Maybe you call it the Tao, or maybe you use the G-word, or maybe for you it's Life Itself. Emerson called it "that great nature in which we rest as the earth lies in the soft arms of the atmosphere; the Unity, that Over-Soul, within which every one's particular being is contained and made one with all other."

Our own lives are the parts that reveal the whole. Our individual moments are woven into a larger pattern of life. Our own ansuish and struggles reflect the struggle of this whole world of life.

And on our way through this world of life we will have to do what we can with the material given.

What we might miss is the indispensable function of *our own artisanship*: We are the weavers.

Or you could say, we are the gardeners. I marvel at those who, by working with strange, unpleasant, and grimy things — *dirt* and *roots* — can work with them so that they bring forth the beauty or nourishment or whatever it is that that new life now coming out of the soil is capable of bringing forth. To work with such messy things you have to have knowledge of their potential and faith in it. *The roots are dark*, but from them come shoots of possibility.

It all turns on how we look at the material given: do we despise and deny it, or do we ask what splendor, what glories, might rise from this rubble?

It's out of the profoundest darkness of those places the cosmologists and physicists called a *vacuum state*, that this universe gives birth to particles and the stars, and the universe is a roaring engine of creativity. Life Itself is a roaring engine of creativity.

Mystics have always understood that. They have always called us to silent wonder in the face of the strength that holds the very fiber of life together and always, always recreates it, no less in times of dark and dislocation than in times of light and comfort.

I don't believe in that old doctrine of Divine Providence as though life were run by some cosmic super-king in some cosmic controlroom with knobs and levers and computer displays. I don't believe in some God who makes us do what we do, who controls everything and has a reason for everything.

I don't believe in some God who sets us up for unpleasant diagnoses, wilderness wanderings, depressions, getting fired or dumped by significant others. But I do believe in that Larger Reality that is always there because life is one whole and life is a roaring engine of creativity, inhabiting the darkness, chaos, and cataclysm just as much as the success, the record income figures, the sunlight and pleasure. The Psalmist got it. There is a Psalm which, loosely and poetically translated, says,

*Where shall I hide from your  
wind, or where find a place  
without your face?  
No long road will lead away / Nor deep  
sea drown  
your sounding voice.  
The darkness leaves no time alone  
For dark and light are both your home.*

The poet Rilke got it:

*You darkness, that I come from,  
I love you more than all the fires*

*that fence in the world . . .  
. . . the darkness pulls in everything:  
shapes and fire, animals and myself,  
how easily it gathers them! —  
powers and people —  
and it is possible a great energy  
is moving near me.*

*I have faith in nights.*

There is an engine of creativity at the heart of Life Itself. There is a life that springs from the soil, a strength powerful enough to supplant the rubble.

If my cataclysm is waking up to my own fragile vulnerability, waking up to the emptiness of the things I relied on, whether some nice airtight religious creed, or whether the signs of outward success, or the reliability of the familiar or the new demands and possibilities of a new time . . . or if beyond all that it's waking up to a way of life that is rapidly destroying the planet that gives us life —

then I may be grateful for the cataclysm: and begin to live in a way that matters humanly in the years that remain.



In the 14th century the great mystic Meister Eckhart offered an image of being *IN* and *WITH* our experience. He once titled a sermon, "Sinking Eternally into God." *Sinking*. He said "We should sink eternally from something into nothing . . . let your 'being YOU' sink and flow into God's 'being GOD.'" Sink into the vortex of being as the depth of a great ocean. It's letting go of control, security of place or identity; letting go all our images, definitions and projections of the mystery of Life Itself. You won't know yourself, your authentic self beyond that ego, until you do.

The same point is taken in a poem composed by the cockroach Archy in Don Marquis' great classic work Archy and Mehitabel about a worm who's just been had for breakfast

by a robin, in which the worm says,  
i am losing my personal identity as a worm  
my individuality is melting away from me  
odds crawl i am becoming  
part and parcel of  
this bloody robin  
so help me i am thinking  
like a robin and not like a worm any  
longer yes yes i even  
find myself agreeing that a robin must live

and then, inside the robin, he meets a previously ingested beetle who agrees that it is better to be merged harmoniously into the cosmic all. Which is quite amusing but

When we are sinking into the unknown dark territory of Life Itself, when our carefully-staged ego-identity collapses, when that for-show ego-self is seen in its full falsity and hollowness, the shame and fake that it is — I swear it is not funny.



In its physical structure and its awesome, its mysterious processes, the Universe itself is at its most creative state at those times when the existing order seems to dissolve, when existing structures seem to give way — situations known to the physicists as *far-from-equilibrium* conditions. And from there — something more sublime than ever was before emerges.

And our lives are parts and particles of those great and mysterious processes, parts and manifestations of the Life of this Universe,

and it is no less true

in the dark times when the known order of our lives unravels and when the structure of our lives, with the dreams we cherish and the things we have come to rely on — seem to dissolve.

Who isn't afraid of sinking, drowning, being overwhelmed? But our fear of sinking might be a fear of the very creative power of Life Itself. What is drowning is not your Essential Self. It's just something you've taken

for an identity, propped up and shown to the world. But there is something magnificent and holy — that you are. From that profound depth of who you are, let it now unfold; let it now reveal the splendor. Be true and faithful to that unfolding Self. We think we know who and what we are but there is more to us. If we skip over that fact and if we're insensitive to the unfolding of who we really are, our cataclysms and our successes only make us more false.

There is more to us than we know, more than has yet been made visible. At the core of our great Unitarian Universalist spiritual tradition there has been from the start a faith in the magnitude of the human, the divinity at the core of our Selves. And the cataclysms and pain are a breaking open, a breaking away of the ego that imprisons us. And when we're broken open, hidden magnificence flows from deep wells.

We know that some of the most splendid works of human creativity have flowed from pain. It is like a coarse, dark rock that breaks open and reveals a stupendous crystal at its center.



But I want to say that this, all this — mirrors something grander than ourselves. In our struggles, our dyings and risings, we are not just separate, isolated entities out there. It isn't just about *my* struggles, *my* disappointments, *my* transformations — or yours.

Because our own struggles mirror the life of this whole aching, promising world.

In the travails and transformations of our lives we ourselves are living the travails and transformations of these times of ours, of our human culture and community of life. Our own spiritual and psychic development mirrors what must happen in our time and culture.

We — this world of life, all of us, in this precarious moment:

we know that we need spectacular change.

It must come.

What will it take?

In our personal lives. In the life of this world. What will it take?



Sink into the depth of Life Itself — like falling into sleep and trusting yourself into that darkness —

spiral down into your own inner depths, which are the creative depths of the universe

allow yourself to be washed through with a strange music, carried by it into a state of wonder

yielding maybe to tears that pour out of your own struggle and the pain of humanity and the struggle of Life Itself — allowing those cleansing waters to roll through you until the clutter and junk is cleared away.

Through eyes cleared with these tears, discern in the dark roots the life that would rise new from the darkness. Welcome it. Struggle with the material given like an artist

In the faith that the roaring engine of creativity which is Life Itself

and that is your life waits there in the darkness to greet you and make everything new

and in that passage through which we must pass

to equip us to be the makers of a new world.



## Words for parting:

*To paraphrase Mr. Emerson:*

The lightning which explodes and fashions planets, maker of planets and suns, is in you. Thought, the spirit which composes and decomposes nature: you shall have not less the flow, the expansion, and the resistance of these. Go in peace and in great strength: the work of peace is in our hands.