

“This Threshold Time”

Sermon by Rev. Duffy Peet

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In my sermon on April 19 I stated that we are facing a crisis. At that time, and still today, the crisis that is getting the most attention is related to COVID-19. Those of us here in Montana are no longer under a stay at home order. That in no way means the crisis is over. Cases are still being reported in the state and in other places the numbers of cases are still increasing.

As the days get longer and warmer, people will want to get out of their homes. They will want to go back to how they used to do things in the past. And at some point, Montana will enter phase two and then phase three of the Governor’s plan titled “Montana: Reopening the Big Sky.” When that occurs, it is very likely there will be visitors and tourists coming to enjoy the many wonders and activities that are present here. Public health experts are telling us that as people’s mobility and contact with others increases, the spread of the virus will do the same, namely increase. All of this is to say that it may seem the crisis is subsiding or even a thing of the past here in Montana. The crisis, however, is not over. It is just in a lull for now. And for that, I am thankful. During this lull, we have an opportunity to take a breath, a long, slow, deep breath, and acknowledge that we are living in a threshold time. Sit with that thought for a moment. What does it mean to be living in a threshold time? Hopefully by the end of this sermon what that means will be clear or at least clearer.

But before I go any further, I want to return to and expand on my statement that we are facing a crisis. Some years ago I had a conversation with a UU minister colleague about a crisis situation that had dealt with. The crisis involved the church they were serving—a crisis that could have done considerable damage to the congregation and its ability to continue functioning. As my colleague shared how they handled the situation they said something that I found to be very wise and even prophetic. I don’t recall my colleague’s exact words but the message was very clear and memorable. They stated that in every crisis there are opportunities. That seemed obvious when I thought about it. But the more important part of their statement was that we must do all we can to insure that the opportunities a crisis presents don’t go to waste. With that thought in mind, I want us to consider the opportunities that are being presented by the COVID-19 pandemic. The opportunities present in this crisis are what makes this a threshold time. Whether we make the most of these opportunities or squander them will make a significant impact on what the future will hold.

And what might some of these opportunities be? I will share just a few of the ones I have become aware of. I hope you will add to the list because there are many more than I can talk about today. The opportunities I am thinking of exist on a continuum—from the level of the individual, all the way up to the level of our human species as a whole. So I want to begin small and then consider the large scale level.

On an individual level, this crisis is putting us all on the threshold of expanding awareness—expanding awareness of ourselves, of others and of our environment. As we have been going through a time of keeping our distance from others, even to the point of isolating ourselves, we have had the opportunity to become aware of many things we have assumed, taken for granted or just simply been unaware of about ourselves. Many people have assumed that their lives would continue on as they had become accustomed—continue on for months, years or even decades to come. Some people thought they could plan just how their future would unfold. These assumptions have, at the very least, been challenged for most of us and for some, these assumptions have been obliterated. We can no longer assume how life will go for us. We can’t take even such things as being able to buy toilet paper for granted. This provides us the opportunity to develop and practice a conscious attitude of gratitude for what we have.

And this crisis has presented many of us with opportunities to learn about ourselves. During this time of physical distancing from others, we may have discovered that we have difficulty being alone for long periods of time. Or maybe there was something we used to do regularly but haven’t been able to during this period. How have we handled that loss. Have we found other ways to fill that time? Are those other ways enjoyable, rewarding, or somehow beneficial? Or have we found ourselves mired in resentment, grief,

depression, anxiety or possibly fear? This crisis may be a threshold for us to learn some things about ourselves—things such as what we really can't do without, what we thought we couldn't do without but can, what we might have been better off doing without, and possibly even what we are now glad to be doing without.

I have found it helpful to contemplate each of the areas for myself. By doing so I have gained a new level of awareness about what is truly essential and worthwhile in my life. If you haven't yet taken the time to think about these areas, I would invite and even encourage you to do so.

In the midst of this crisis, I would suggest that it could be beneficial for all of us to consider these same areas when it comes to the grand scale of things as well. I say that because I don't believe it will be possible for us to return to what was normal prior to the emergence of COVID-19. In fact, I really don't believe it would be appropriate or beneficial for us to go back to the normal that was. There is a phrase that I have read and heard people using about where we may be headed. You have likely heard the phrase as well—the "new normal." It seems to me this phrase, and the fact that it is being used by so many people, is an indication that we are living in a threshold time.

So what might the new normal involve? I will offer just a few examples of what I hope the new normal includes and I would encourage you to think about areas I may not mention. Something I hope the new normal includes is the continuing reduction in the use of fossil fuels. One of the positive aspects of this pandemic is that it has caused a significant drop in fossil fuel consumption. This drop in fossil fuel consumption is important. If we are going to avert a catastrophic crisis of our own making, we need to not just continue but to accelerate this reduction in fossil fuel use. This crisis might provide the impetus to make the changes that are needed.

I hope the new normal will also include universal health care. There has been a significant push over the past several years to turn back the progress which had been made early in this century. Progress that allowed many people who hadn't previously been able to afford health insurance to obtain such coverage. As millions of people have become unemployed as a result of this pandemic, many of them risk losing their employment related health insurance plans. I don't know for certain, but I imagine a good number of these people assumed that because they were employed their health insurance was secure. That assumption has gone out the window. And with it, I hope, will go the idea that only those who can afford health insurance should be able to receive appropriate and needed medical care.

Another area that I believe the new normal ought to include involves social injustice. There are so many examples I could site here that I could go on for an hour or more. But for this sermon I will mention just one area for us to think about and ask you to come up with others. As all of you know, there has been a strong anti-immigrant movement in this country over the past several years. There have even been a significant push to get approval for spending billions of U.S. tax dollars to build a wall to keep undocumented migrants from entering this country. The truth is, without migrants, both documented and undocumented, much of the food we eat would be unavailable to us. And the pandemic has brought out the fact that the working conditions for many of these migrants are deplorable, often demeaning, and even dangerous. We, as a society and a culture, have been taking advantage of these people. It is time for the practices that have been "normal" for far too long to be brought to the light of day and changed. This could be a threshold time for us in regards to awareness and a threshold time for these people if we, as a society, are able to begin treating them with the respect they deserve.

And then there is the area of science. Science has been under assault in this country for years. It has become "normal" for science to not only be questioned but for science to be doubted and even derided. This pandemic has made that assault very, very clear. In the past few months, this ongoing and intensifying assault on science has resulted in many deaths in our country and around the world. But this pandemic is also increasing the number of people who want to know what the scientists have to say. And more and more people are believing the scientists over the science averse nay-sayers. I, for one, don't want us to go back to the old normal when it comes to how we value science. My guess is many of you don't want us to go back there either.

These are just a few of the areas that I believe are indicative of what I said earlier, that we are living in a threshold time. Living in a threshold time is not easy. As with any threshold, we don't know for sure what the future holds. Being on the threshold includes a great deal of uncertainty. It also often involves a significant amount of risk. Living on the threshold presents so many challenges that we can find ourselves overwhelmed. In an attempt to cope with all of the uncertainty and sense of being overwhelmed we may wish for a return to how things were before. In other words, we may want life to go back to what we knew as normal.

I would encourage us all to look for and even to strive for a new normal—a new normal that is more just, more sustainable, more considerate, more respectful and more compassionate than how things were before COVID-19 arrived. The time has come my friends for us to pause on the threshold of a new day and a new way of being. At some point we will need to take steps, maybe tentative initially, across the threshold from what was to what will be. As we do so I hope we remember and find encouragement in these words by the poet, John O'Donohue.

Awaken your spirit to adventure;
Hold nothing back, learn to find ease in risk;
Soon you will be home in a new rhythm,
For your soul senses the world that awaits you.

As we move from what was into what will be, may we seek to discover the opportunities embedded in this crisis. And may we strive to make the new normal better than what was, not just for us, but for everyone.

So may it be.