

Transition Series The Void

It feels almost surreal to think that it has been just a week since we had our Sunday service in the sanctuary, in our familiar seats at Unity of Lehigh Valley. If you were with us, you know the topic was Endings. In a time of transition, the first indicator the process is underway is the ending. Innocently, we thought this transition series was preparation for my retirement and leaving ULV. As events have unfolded in our outer world, we are experiencing a transition in how we interact on a daily basis. Last week would prove to be a different kind of ending—one we can only see in hindsight. That is the somewhat unpredictable nature of endings; sometimes you don't know it is the "last time" until it is over. Which leads me to remind everyone to stay prayed up! Getting through this week took quite a bit of energy as conditions continued to evolve and change. It helps to have a prayer practice in place and to stay prayed up as you move through the days ahead. Really it helps any ordinary day at all!

Mark told me he thinks of the Void as an "intermission". An intermission is really a pause in something continuous and the most disconcerting thing about a void is that there has been an ending. Something is now missing and it is not entirely clear yet what the next thing is. Reverend Brumet says "The Void touches our deepest fears of helplessness, of abandonment, of death. Indeed, most of us would do anything to avoid these feelings. It is the avoidance of these feelings that is behind many of our addictive and dysfunctional behavior patterns." How many of us feel helplessness? How many of us have considered death in the past week? For those not accessing the service on Facebook this morning, I am confident there is a feeling of abandonment. I have already heard it expressed. In the weeks after I leave, the thoughts of death may not be literal or even physical but about the life of community. I am not affirming any of these thoughts but presenting them as normal human responses to finding ourselves in a void.

In nature, many of the transition processes occur without any choice. The seed dissolves into the sprout without a decision. The caterpillar might **never** spin a cocoon if it understood that it would come completely undone in there and emerge a totally different being. As sentient and reflective beings we get to make choices. Last week I talked about the style choices we had in handling the endings: head in the sand, drug forward kicking and screaming, or head up and eyes open embracing the ending. How we choose to engage the ending may also impact how we engage the void.

With either head in the sand or kicking or screaming, our behavior may begin to engage the numbing actions of our choice. Those numbing actions of alcohol, shopping, over-eating, binge watching television or whatever your choice is. We find mindless things to do to fill the empty spaces in our head so that the thoughts we fear, the fears themselves, don't have room to move into conscious awareness. The very dread of looking at the icky stuff drives us deeper into numbing actions. The Void becomes a downward spiral and we wonder if there is any way out. We pray for a new beginning even though we are totally unprepared for it. Why? Because we haven't cleared out a space for a new beginning. We haven't processed the ending and we haven't let go of the fears that fill the void.

What might happen in the Void if we were choosing to engage the ending with our head up and eyes open to embrace what is?

Do any of you remember when we redid the sanctuary space a couple years ago? We literally took everything out. We replaced the carpet. We kept the chairs. We painted the walls. Then consciously and deliberately in the empty space we reflected on what we wanted to put back in the sanctuary. There was space for some clarity in the openness we created and what we see today does not look very much like what was here before. I would say that one was not better than the other. I would say that each was/is appropriate for who we were/are in the moment. Endings are the evidence that Spirit has something different for us. An expansion of some sort, no matter how much we grieve an ending. We can't get to the expansion unless we are willing to spend time in the in-between time, gaining clarity about our fears, our letting go process. Brumet quotes the German mystic, Meister Eckhart, "God is not found in the soul by adding anything, but by a process of subtraction."

In this very present Void I noticed immediately I had to let go of my familiar ideas about how church is done. I am guessing we may discover some creative options we have postponed considering because we just stuck with what we know. The Ending, although temporary, was prompted because the Board felt the health of the community was a priority too important to ignore by just doing what we've always done. The Void of not having gatherings created space. We'll be reflecting on what is important as we pay attention to the feelings we feel about the Ending. We may be accessing new technology. I am confident that in this emptiness, we will discern some new ways for Spirit to express through us in our New Beginning.

Certainly there are more feelings to be present to if we are willing to engage the Ending and be present to what arises in the Void. Right now and in the weeks and months to come. So how do we sit in the Void and move through it? I'll take some ideas from the book and from the announcement that went out through ULV:

1. Try not to get lost in your feelings and yet allow them to come up. We talked about feelings in Endings. When it seems nothing is happening and there is no certainty, different feelings may come up. Let them. Notice them.
2. Journal the feelings and experiences. Dig a little deeper into where you first noticed them and how many other experiences these feelings might be tied to. Return to center and know that feelings are part of the temporary human experience and aren't forever. At first, let go of the urgency of the feeling. When you are ready, begin releasing the power and energy you are giving the feeling.
3. Don't try to "push the river". Moses wandered for 40 years. That stands for "as long as it takes". The transition process will take as long as it takes and the key is to stay patient. The river only flows one direction so don't try to go backwards, just to seek something familiar and comfortable. The cocoon can't be opened until the butterfly is able to push its way out. To try to open it early will mean the death of the butterfly. Try not to kill the seeds of a new beginning by digging them up to see if they are growing.
4. Keep up with your prayer and meditation practices. Now is not the time to think you can let them go or you are too busy for prayer. If some new practice arises in the void, embrace it. Just don't give up spiritual practice!
5. Trust the process. Trust God. That's how faith works. Confidence in what is unseen. Beneath the frozen ground in winter, within the bare limbs of trees, inside eggs and within cocoons and in the broad empty space we create, divine life is busy creating. Anticipate good and in moments of tears, simply sit in the silence of not knowing the shape and time of the good.
6. Do not contract in fear. Stay open and generous with your time, talent and treasure. Give in the smallest of ways to keep yourself open when you feel the tightness clutching your heart. Make a card or make a donation or make a cake. Make a cup of tea and sit down on the phone to listen. Give of yourself.
7. Take care of yourself physically. One of the oddest paradoxes that we fail to acknowledge is that the still and silent stress of grief and uncertainty is exhausting. Stay hydrated with water. Exercise gently and include lots of stretches, warm ups and cool downs. Eat healthy. Rest. Rest includes meditation, reading and taking a nap.

8. Stay connected. Often in times of stress we isolate ourselves. We may feel that others don't feel the way we do. In times of change, we fear we will be judged for our opinion. With social distancing comes distance! Distance doesn't have to mean disconnection and change doesn't mean support is abandoned. We have a system of chaplains for support. The board is open to hearing **all** the voices in the congregation as the process unfolds. One benefit to spiritual community is the ability to lift one another up. Call someone you know. When we go back to meeting in our building, speak to someone you don't know. Use social media to connect with others. If you perceive darkness, be the light! This is a unique time in the creative process of ministry so be creative.

This week has been a reminder of both that I am in this process **with you** AND apparently there is no coasting to the finish line for me! The Void is not forever! Don't get trapped in the limits of human conditioning that prompt us to avoid uncomfortable feelings and rush into the next thing. The first lesson in the Bible is that out of nothingness came everything! However science ends up explaining that the metaphysics of it remain that in creating an open space we unleash our good. Next week I will answer questions. If your question is not already in the box at church you can email me at revjoy@rcn.com. Then we'll end our series by exploring the intentionality of new beginnings.