

Saving the World When Spring Hangs Up On You

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Good morning and good Sunday. I hope that this new day finds you well. Today is Sunday, June 6<sup>th</sup> and we are nearing the end of spring! This morning's reflection is inspired by this season. It is entitled Saving the World When Spring Hangs Up On You. This title comes from the jazz standard, the classic—Spring Can Really Hang You Up the Most—but the reflection turns things around a little bit.

It's so important to be good to ourselves, to take things lightly...not too seriously. I take myself too seriously sometimes. You wouldn't believe what I put myself through, regularly, on a daily basis. You wouldn't believe what I, totally annoyed by these days. It's embarrassing. I spilled coffee and freaked out about it. I lost one of my favorite books (but I have two copies). My gardening plans were 'rescheduled' by a cloud of biting flies and I almost wound up in tears. Clearly, I'm carrying a little too much tension!

So, I was blue and I was singing that jazz standard to myself.

Spring this year has got me feeling  
Like a horse that never left the post  
I lie in my room and stare at the ceiling  
Spring can really hang you up the most

The song is about unrequited love but it helped me to deal with the spilled coffee, the lost book and the flies that ruined my morning.

So, I was blue and I was singing. I'm drawn to that song by its melancholy, by the way it sucker-punches my heart when I'm not looking, when my guard is down.

I can get stuck in melancholia. I used to feel guilty about that, back when I didn't understand my feelings. I understand them better now. They don't topple me like they used to. I'm sorting things out these days. I'm clearing things up and working things out. It's a spiritual spring cleaning and I'm the better for it. When I don't do this, my heart breaks and I get blue. I'm not alone. Many of us are drawn by melancholia.

I was learning about Greta Thurberg, the Swedish teenager-environmentalist. I'm so grateful for her presence in this crazy world. She speaks out and she cries. She's a real person. They say that she's "melancholy" but it's a shallow analysis. She's a deep thinker, bravely confronting the dangers of climate change and, more powerfully, confronting our collective resistance to facing these dangers. She's not 'melancholy,' not in the romantic sense, anyway. It's not like she's missing an old boyfriend or something. She's brokenhearted by the state of the world sometimes and so am I. She said,

So many people are so sad and so depressed...but that is a good thing...because it means they still have empathy and they don't want to live in this world where we have lost empathy.

She values the idea of saving the Earth and all of its people and she is witness to the political resistance to see to that end.

There are two ways to go with such feelings. They can close us down or they can help us to flower, to transform ourselves into something more beautiful. When we flower, melancholia leads us into community. When we don't, we tend to isolate ourselves. No judgment. We need different things at different times.

When I think about melancholia and community, the very first thing that comes to mind: a high school hallway filled halfway to the ceiling with hundreds of blue-green balloons. Brian David Hardin tells the story. He says that...

A [wise and gentle teacher had given] a balloon to every [single] student [in the school. The students were instructed] to inflate [the balloon, to] write their name on it and [to] throw it out in the hallway. [The hallway filled up quickly. The teacher] then mixed [up] all the balloons [by walking through them. Oh, man! I wish I could have been there that day.] The students were then given 5 minutes to find their own balloon and despite a hectic search, no one [was successful. No one found what they were looking for].

This is unenlightened melancholia—the frantic, fruitless and lonely search for individual happiness. Fortunately, this is not the end of the story. It continues, ...the [teacher then] told the students to take the first balloon that they found and hand it to the person whose name was written on it. Within 5 minutes, everyone had their own balloon. The [teacher] said to the students: "These balloons are like happiness. We will never find it if everyone is looking for their own. But if we care about other people's happiness, we'll find ours too."

I love this story. It reminds me of the power of empathy and the power of empathy is beautiful soul-level deep.

Empathy helps us to look at life without fear, helps us to look life right in the eye and take it on and work its wonders. Empathy helps us to rise and meet the challenges that are before us. It was important for us last week. It helped us stand up for what we believe. We stood with Tulsa, Oklahoma last week as they honored history.

On May 31<sup>st</sup> and June 1<sup>st</sup> of 1921, the Greenwood area, a forty-block section of the city of Tulsa, was burned to the ground. The Tulsa Race Massacre happened 100 years ago now. We held Tulsa prayerfully in our service last Sunday. We stood with them...with their grief because their grief is our own. We stood with their shock because their shock is ours as well. We are connected. We stood with a sense of compassion that comes from facing the difficult truth in Tulsa, facing the violence that it has known over the years.

I say 'shock' because it's possible to have grown up in Tulsa and have no idea about what happened there in 1921. It's not possible if you lived in Greenwood...and not possible if you're in an empathetic relationship with the black community in Tulsa. But it is possible if you don't live in Greenwood and if you're not connected.

An old teacher of mine, one of the ministers with whom I served in St. Paul... She grew up in Tulsa. She grew up in the church that was a part of the massacre and

she had no idea about this history. So, it's shocking. It can be shocking to find out about one's own past.

This experience is not an anomaly. It was a common experience—then and now. We have to grapple with this.

It was common to look away in Tulsa. That's why so many did not know until now. A cartoon describing this dynamic was just published in the newspaper recently. The cartoon was called "100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of a Cover-up." We've been looking away for quite a long time...by design. The cartoon depicts a bone-yard (unkempt, decades overgrown and meant-to-be-forgotten, littered with bricks, a rusted headboard from an old bed and a busted tire). There is a lone headstone that reads, "TULSA RACE MASSACRE, 1921." The headstone was not meant to be seen. The event was not meant to be remembered. But we've outgrown the time of looking away.

After the North Chapel coffee hour last Sunday, I 'attended' the UU service in Tulsa and they were deep into remembering the past. They were fearless about it. Black folks and white folks and women and men and the kids listened and learned and honored a terrible and tragic history.

It was all on Zoom. I dialed in and muted myself. I disabled the video component so I could garden in East Barnard while I went to church in Tulsa. That was a first. By attending the service this way, I could steer my energy—my sorrow—I could guide it through my body and into the earth where our bodies are buried. It just seemed like a healthy thing to do.

We are all the same in life...and same beyond this life. I think that we should mark our living with all the beauty that we can...with all of the grace. It's just like Skye and Kristen McEntyre shared with us last week...in that poem by Joy Harjo. Remember. Joy wrote,

Remember your birth, how your mother struggled  
to give you form and breath. You are evidence of  
her life, and her mother's, and hers.  
Remember your father. He is your life, also.  
Remember the earth whose skin you are:  
red earth, black earth, yellow earth, white earth  
brown earth, we are earth.

Joy Harjo was the U.S. poet laureate in 2019. She is a member of the Mvskoke/Creek Nation and she was born in Tulsa in 1951. Joy Harjo encourages empathy as we look at life and beauty.

You know, I was thinking about empathy last Sunday. I thought that my colleague in Tulsa was empathetic. He was courageous. Brave. Even with the kids of the church...and, you know, he built that station slowly...over time. He built a station from which he is now able to speak safely about what happened, a station from which he is able to make a big difference today. It didn't happen overnight. He didn't come in pontificating. He spent twenty years building up the might. There's a saying: "No one cares how much you know until they know how much you care." Life's like that—in all its drama and simplicity. When we don't understand all of this, I get blue and melancholy.

Anyway, after coffee hour at North Chapel, I went to Tulsa, to the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary service led by Rev. Dr. Lavanhar. It's online. You can see it if you'd like. Joanne will post the link on the North Chapel website.

I stood in my garden in East Barnard and I went to church in Tulsa. I Zoomed in and when I did, what I found was lovely. Good people trying to come to terms with life and with tragedy. It's just so big sometimes. It's hard to get your arms around it but we all just stood with one another throughout the service.

And that's what we did after the service, as well. I was tending my garden and grieving but I wasn't talking very much. I stood alongside the tragedy and tried to find my way to joy. I stood alongside an elegant woman, 107 years young...the lovely Viola Fletcher—the eldest survivor of the Tulsa Massacre. We find joy together...we, the people of this good earth...this good red earth...and this good black earth...and this good yellow earth...and this good white earth...and this good brown earth.

We were together—all of the people of this planet. We flowered in our heart and we felt groovy about ourselves. We felt flower-power groovy—almost—just to be with one another online. And someone remarked at how common it has become for beloved community to be conjoined online in times of crisis. They said that all of this Zoom-time is slowly changing us...changing how we gather...changing how we are together...coming together with no travel time from all over the world...finding comfort in our boxes on smart phones and computer screens...each of us in our own, bubble...in our own, little fishbowls, as it were. Each of us, in our own, little aquariums. And then, it happened. I suppose that it couldn't be helped. Some almost groovy person in that group of us online, someone with a singular sense of humor reminded us about our cosmic connections. I could hear the singing,

When the moon is in the Seventh House  
And Jupiter aligns with Mars  
Then peace will guide the planets  
And love will steer the stars.

I was reminded of these words because an almost groovy person was making a joke. Poking fun at the Zoom boxes within which regularly find ourselves these days, he said,

This is the dawning of the age of Aquariums

Then, someone started singing the song out loud and lots of people laughed.

The Age of Aquariums. This is what passes for humor these days. And I can get with it...because it is so healthy and serves us well. Laughter has power and righteousness enough to shatter the outer shell of our oppression and take us to where we truly need to go. We sing about it. We sing of...

Harmony and understanding  
Sympathy and trust abounding.

We sing these good things into being. It was an almost groovy joke and it really wasn't that funny. I groaned in my discomfort but I found the good in it. We all did. We found the goodness of life and that was a gift. It stayed with me all week. It

helped me with my seasonal melancholia—with the coffee that I can spill, with the books that I can lose, with my anger at the flies that ruin my gardening...to say nothing about unrequited love. Laughter helps, happiness helps when spring hangs up on you. Connectedness helps us with the challenges of this season.

The first day of summer is coming up soon. The first day of spring happened a while ago, now. It occurred on the 20<sup>th</sup> of March. There was still snow on the ground. Not as much as there has been in the past but more than I'm used to...as a Jersey boy. Early spring is hard for me sometimes, living up here in Vermont. Spring is lovely...not doubt. I'm not complaining. Not at all. I'm just noticing a few things, differences with spring in other areas.

For years, I lived in North Carolina. That was my farthest south. I used to live in the city of Durham. Really good people, for the most part. The ones I didn't like were from New York and Philly. Really food and really good music. Durham is hundreds of miles south of here. It's considerably west of Woodstock. So, the mornings come later and evenings linger on. Springtime comes much earlier.

On the first day of spring, we still had snow. I have a picture dated March the 23<sup>rd</sup>. I play balancing games with nature sometimes...and I played on March the 20<sup>th</sup>. I remember because it was the equinox. The equinox is the time of year when the length of the day and the length of the night are exactly the same.

Urban legend has it that you can balance an egg lengthwise on a hard, flat surface on the equinox. You can try it but you just might make a mess. It's just a legend. I'm not sure if it's true but have fun with it. I do...in my way. I don't spend the time trying to balance eggs on tables or anything but I do make cairns sometimes. I like to do that on the equinox.

Cairns are piles of stones—strategic stones and useful. They are markers—like hard and heavy, permanent bread crumbs along a forest path. They are signposts and warnings and gravesite markers. I wonder if that's where the word headstone comes from.

Cairns have history. At Stonehenge, hundreds gathered on March 20<sup>th</sup> this year to watch the sunrise through the great stones of that monument on the first day of spring. Those stones were balanced about 5,000 years ago and still today, we

appreciate it. The ancient ones were looking out for us. We're honored by that, ennobled by it. And we must pay this forward and not squander it on ourselves. We have to be mindful of the future. When we're not, I get a little blue.

Hundreds gathered at Stonehenge this year to welcome the coming of warmer weather. I don't know if there is still any snow on the ground in England but there was snow here. I know. I have a picture. I know because I played a balancing game with nature on that day. I built a cairn. I rebuilt a cairn, actually. It had blown over over the winter. There was a tremendous





windstorm where I live. The wind had blown over the cairn. Its stones were scattered in and buried in the snow. You couldn't even see some of them. They were covered over by the drift.

By March 20<sup>th</sup>, most of the snow had melted away and it was a good time to build the cairn again. [pause] And I did that on the 20<sup>th</sup>...and it felt good to rebuild it...because it was the equinox, maybe...and because it made me feel connected. COVID fears were ramping up back then. We were becoming increasingly aware of its dangers. We were frantic—some of us were—because the worldwide death toll had topped 10,000. It's so strange. The global toll today is 3.7 million and, somehow, we are much more grounded. I'm grateful for that. We've made so many adjustments over this last year...and we understand ourselves much better now. We get wiser every day.



The Earth finds best balance at the equinox but we find balance all of the time—by playing balance games with nature...by being honest with ourselves. When we're lucky, what balance we find can last a while...long enough for old things to melt away...long enough for new things to grow.

The deep truth is that for things to grow, we need community. We need each other...and in surprising ways. So, that old jazz standard comes up short. It cannot save the world if it doesn't get beyond its melancholy. We may sing,

Morning's kiss wakes trees and flowers  
And to them I'd like to drink a toast  
I walk in the park just to kill the lonely hours  
Spring can really hang you up the most

But we sing in community...and we dance with the trees and flowers. This is the Age of Aquariums after all. It's springtime. Spring is here—with its bright flowers blooming and with its green grasses growing and with its rushing, fresh waters running fast and free...in every nook and brook and crook and creek and stream and flowing river.

Melancholy in the company of others, in the presence of empathy can transform quickly into honest joy. That's our journey. And with honest joy, one can save oneself and ask, "What's next?"

May it be so. Blessed be and amen.