

Rev. Betsy Mead Tabor
UU Fellowship of the Eastern Slopes
May 21, 2017

In chaotic times, we are held.

Flying Off the Handle

Chaos unsettles us. It wakes us up, too.

Like the morning of the blue and white teapot. When my cup clinked against it just so, the entire handle fell off onto the kitchen counter. Unusual—I've never seen that happen. Momentous, too, given this teapot's central role in my life, filled daily, many times a day, for years. Too bad!

Getting out of the car a few hours later, juggling groceries, laptop and travel mug, I noticed there was tea still in it, which I flung out onto the grass as usual. Is there such a thing as coincidence? Would you believe the *whole mug* went flying into the neighbors' yard, leaving me holding this empty handle?

Another handle? Two in one day? When does it happen that two identical, unusual and catastrophic accidents happen within hours of each other? Literally flying off the handle. What's with that? What will happen next? Better pay attention.

Flying off the handle. The expression means to lose self control. It refers to the haphazard, erratic way the head of an ax can fly off from its handle—apparently not uncommon once upon a time. Imagine not knowing when a sharp beveled hunk of steel might come flying in your direction.

When things fly off the handle, physically or otherwise, we find ourselves distracted and unnerved, waiting and wondering what will happen next. That week of the broken handles earlier this month happened to be one when people on both sides of the political spectrum were glued to their news sources. Headlines kept pouring in, shockers, and, though you dreaded the next one, you couldn't help but check for it, knowing it would come, knowing it could be disturbing but not knowing when. Compelling...and stressful.

The blogosphere picked up on this. Author and speaker Deepak Chopra said that the chaotic news cycle was upsetting people, stressing us out. He wrote a practical article about how to cope with this...and any stress. Google it—it's good. "Stress," he wrote, "is maximized whenever three elements are present: repetition [the stressful thing never stops], unpredictability [you never know when it will strike again], and loss of control [flying off the handle]."¹

Chopra referred to studies about stress in laboratory mice: "...mice," he said, "were placed on electric plates that delivered innocuous shocks [think: headlines] at random intervals. The mice had no control; the shocks were repetitive and unpredictable. Within a few days the animals'

¹Deepak Chopra, *Daily Beast*, The Resistance, "Climbing Down from Trump Rage—Why We Must," <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2017/05/11/deepak-chopra-climbing-down-from-trump-rage-why-we-must?via=newsletter&source=DDMorning>

immune systems were degraded, they exhibited abnormal behaviors, and some quickly died.”
Died!

Think how repetition, unpredictability and loss of control play out in our lives:

- We receive unexpected bad news, then some more bad news, and we begin to wonder, “What bad thing’s going to happen next? What else is out there?” Stressful.
- An appliance breaks. Or a tool. It’s rarely one—more like two three—and we wonder if everything’s going to go? Stressful.
- We have an unpleasant conversation with someone, and we’re on guard the next time around. Stressful.
- Or what about when we report a service problem to our Internet provider, they keep us on the phone for an hour then, after promising a repair and follow-up, they don’t deliver. When the same thing happens again two days later, our anxiety ramps up. As with the teapot, we count on our devices. They’re supposed to work, and when they don’t, chaos sets in—we don’t have our usual sources of information; we can’t reach people in that instantaneous way; we can’t get things done. Stressful.

The list of stresses has no end. And so we might ask, what can we hold on to when the world flies off the handle? When *we* seem to be flying off the handle? What handle can we reach for when life feels out of control? What brings us in from the chaos?

Look at the back of your order of service. In the middle, do you see the list of Unitarian Universalist Principles? Look at the last six words. What are they? “Of which we are a part.” The seventh—and some think the all-time great UU principle—says, “We affirm and promote respect for the interdependent web of all existence *of which we are a part.*”

We are a part. A part of something bigger. A part of all existence. A part of the web of all existence. A part of the interdependent web of all existence. Who needs a handle to hold on to when we are a part of all existence? When we are held, every one of us, in this miracle of creation.

That day of things flying off the handle occurred just as May began to take off. May can feel fuller than full, with end-of-the-school-year recitals and graduations, summer plans on the calendar. Outside, all hell is breaking loose. One day the garden looks good, the next day weeds have not only sprouted but are tall. May bursts out all over—a spectacle that defies belief, boggles the mind. Again this year, my husband John’s schoolboy story comes to mind. Since he told me this story some thirty years ago, a year hasn’t passed that one of us hasn’t told it again—good stories bear repeating.

John’s 8th-grade science teacher assigned a patch of ground to each student in the class, about fifteen feet square. Over the course of several weeks in May, their assignment was to chronicle everything that happened there. It was cold to start, and John remembers crawling over his plot on his hands and knees. Nothing was happening.

Then spring began to unfold. What does a middle-schooler care about spring? But this year, he

saw it with new eyes. Slowly at first and then faster and faster, things started happening. Every week something new appeared—grasses, weeds, plants he'd never seen before. Critters emerged, familiar and not, creeping and buzzing and flying through webs, holes and hills. Greens got greener.

John's biggest learning from that project was about the pace of spring. As the changes in his plot of ground picked up speed, there was more and more to write up every day, sometimes too many things to chronicle. Eventually, he couldn't keep up. There was too much going on. Before his eyes, his little patch of ground was growing, living and transforming beyond what he could handle. Almost beyond what he could fathom. That patch of grass gone haywire with the life force made a impression on a kid who still talks about it fifty years later.

This May also has a free-wheeling, burgeoning, so-much-going-on feel—on the edge of chaos. Who can keep up? Yet the pace and the change in every square foot out there—what Annie Dillard calls the creator's "pizzazz"—is something of which we are a part. Something holy.

In her book entitled *Leaving Church*, Episcopal Rev. Barbara Brown Taylor explores where she finds the holy, which she, and some amongst us, calls God:

I know plenty of people who find God most reliably in books, in buildings, and even in other people. I have found [it] in all of these places too, but the most reliable meeting place for me has always been creation. Since I first became aware of the Divine Presence in that lit-up field in Kansas, I have known where to go when my own flame is guttering. To lie with my back flat on the fragrant ground is to receive a transfusion of the same power that makes the green blade rise. To remember that I am dirt and to dirt I shall return is to be given my life back again, if only for one present moment at a time.²

What do you feel on "the fragrant ground" of which we are a part? What is it like to sense "the same power that makes the green blade rise"? To know that you are held even in the chaos of spring "of which we are a part"? To know, as a active participant in the unfolding of the universe, the crazy pace, the beauty, the exuberance "of which you are a part"...and of which your headlines, your appliances and your teapots are also a part? In times of chaos, we can hold onto that knowing.

There's something else we can hold onto in the chaos. It's what we have right here in this room. Community. Each other. Writer Anne Lamott teaches students about expression, writing, reading, communicating. Why does it matter?

Because of the spirit [she writes] ...Because of the heart. [Our words] decrease our sense of isolation. They deepen and widen and expand our sense of life: they feed the soul. When we make each other shake our heads with the exactness of our words and our truths, and even make us laugh about ourselves or life, our buoyancy is restored. We are given a shot at dancing with, or at least clapping along with, the absurdity of life, instead

² Barbara Brown Taylor, *Leaving Church: A Memoir of Faith*....Harper-Collins, 2009.

of being squashed by it over and over again. It's like singing on a boat during a terrible storm at sea. You can't stop the raging storm.³

Held in community, all we need is here. [Sing "All We Need is Here" together.]

Now and then, life gives us a wake-up call. It throws into question things we've always counted on. It might be a cataclysmic call—a diagnosis, a loss, a betrayal—or a synchronicity that startles us. (Broken handles? What *do* we hold on to?) Awakened, we're thrown yet again into chaos. Forced to pay attention. To look up anew. What is here?

Perhaps what's here is the truth of being held. Let us allow ourselves that. May we lean into *being held* not only in this blooming, bursting, teeming, dying world "of which we are a part" but right here, held in this beloved community. All we need is here.

So may it be.

³ Anne Lamott, *bird by bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life*. New York: Anchor Books, 1994, p. 237.