

Rev. Elizabeth Mead Tabor
UU Fellowship of the Eastern Slopes
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Unexpected moments help us learn and grow.

What We Know

TIME FOR ALL AGES (notes) - Marion Posner

Life has unexpected twists and turns. The only sure thing that you can expect, is that the unexpected will arrive, often with no warning. And you have to find ways to deal with it!

(Get SNAKE puppet out. Hold it straight and unmoving.) You can remain rigid, & stubborn. “This is not what I am ready for, prepared for!” And put your head in the sand, like an ostrich (Bend SNAKE’s head down with a TRISTLE sound or mimic with SNAKE.) You can be FLEXIBLE. You can work with the moment, adapt to new circumstances, find new ways forward. And sometimes you will do this with no notice. You just have to trust your own resources.

BUMPER STICKER I saw and want to have on my car ~ ‘Blessed are the flexible for they cannot be bent out of shape’. So, that means you can stay steady and strong even if you are going this way and that to deal with new things. Hmm. That means you need an ANCHOR. You know, the big heavy thing ships throw overboard. You need something strong inside to hold you steady so that you can be creative, work your way around panic or a feeling of “I can’t do this!”

I have a suggestion that helps me a lot. It is a heavy one. It is BOOKS. Books carry a lot of what you need to find an anchor for yourself. Books are full of people who search for anchors. I keep some books on a bookcase at home. books that I feel comforted by; they help me feel rooted, steady. One of them I have quoted from a few times before and will do so again, from a different page. A good book is worth visiting again and again, especially if you have that feeling: “I can relate to this character! I am not alone!”

Last week, we talked about homelessness and the need in every one of us to have a physical and also a deep-down home. The part from *The Wind in the Willows* I will read is about 'home' as an anchor when the unexpected has made its sudden and unwelcome appearance in Mole’s life.

On the way home Mole asked if he could try rowing.

“Not yet” smiled Rat. “You’ll need some lessons first.”

But Mole, full of lunch and confidence, jumped up and seized the oars. But, as he tried to row, he lost his balance and ~ SPLOOSH ~ they were both in the river!

The cold water sang in Mole’s ears as he felt himself sinking down and down. Then a firm paw gripped the back of his neck. It was Rat ~ and Mole could *feel* him laughing. Rat propelled the helpless animal to shore,, and hauled him out, a squashy, miserable, wet lump.

Mole was deeply ashamed.... “That’s all right!” laughed Rat. “What’s a little wet to a Water Rat? But look here! Why don’t you come and stay with me for a while? I could teach you how to row and to swim as well.”

So back they went to Rat's house. Rat made a fire in the parlor and lent Mole a dressing gown and slippers.

Then, after supper, Mole fell asleep in the best bedroom, listening to his new friend, the River, lapping against the window outside."

Now I think this last line is important ~The river had delivered the unexpected. But, in the safety of Rat's home, the Mole could begin to stop fearing it. The anchor steadied him. I think we can be sure to find our own anchors, our own homes in books. Anchors that give us freedom for a creative meeting with life's twists and turns.

And I find that Quotes are helpful. The Scottish poet Robert Burns wrote: "I pick up my favourite quotations and store them in my mind as ready armour, offensive or defensive, amid the struggle of this turbulent existence." Here is one of his that I keep in MY mind: It is about a mouse who built its nest. It was all prepared for family life BUT, along came a plough and destroyed its home (by mistake):

"But Mousie thou art thy lane,
In proving foresight may be vain,
The best laid plans o'mice and men gang oft a-gley."

(The best laid plans of mice and men often go wrong). That is a quote that I store in my mind. I say it out aloud, often!

I leave you with my opening thoughts: Expect the Unexpected! And try going through some books to find your anchors, so you may cavort and act creatively!

P.S. Because of Sandra's inspiring words about stars this morning, maybe *Le Petit Prince* would be worth delving into for anchors....

SERMON

What We Know

The wheel of the year ever turns, and again, last week, it was time at UUFES for staff evaluations. No one looks forward to writing up your key strengths and presenting to a committee your progress in meeting the goals you set last year.

But you know? The evaluation process often has a silver lining. We look back at the work we did and see that we have come a distance; the hills we've climbed are quite a view. Often, we come away from an evaluation with a sense of accomplishment, and *that* fuels our ability to look to the next mountain, the next steps on the path, to dream about what we'd like to do next. Reflection and action.

This year's evaluations brought up a common theme: what to do when things don't work out as planned. It often happens that, when Marion or Alice arrives and sees how many children are here and how old they are, they have to scrap their prepared plan and scale it up or down for the day. Likewise, Shana finds out at 9 a.m. how many singers she has, which often translates into changing her plan on the fly.

How blessed we are that both of them are master improvisers. They arrive prepared, their plans carefully considered and steeped in UU values; they're also fully ready for the unexpected. "You know what the Marines call what you do?" said Board member Pamela Ambrose (whose son was a Marine). "They call it field expediency." Field expediency is a critical skill – the ability, when you arrive on the scene without what you need, to make do with what you have.

This is life, right? We may have our routines. We may have thought long and hard about our values and know what matters the most to us. But our days don't flow by without event – life would be boring if they did. Rather, life surprises us with unexpected delights and beauty and unexpected obstacles too, sometimes outright shocks, and we have to make do with what we have. It is for us to respond to the unexpected.

The wheel of the year ever turns, and again we come around this week to the Christian season of Lent, the six somber weeks that lead to remembering the death of the prophet and teacher, Jesus of Nazareth. During Lent, observant Christians take stock of their lives. They contemplate their mortality. On Ash Wednesday, this coming week, people on sidewalks in towns and cities all over the world will bow their heads to receive a smudge of ashes, a symbol of our mortality.

Whatever religion we practice, seasons like this are a call to pay attention. Many religions set aside a time for a sober taking stock of one's life. Think of Yom Kippur in the fall, the holiest day of year in Judaism, which is characterized by deep personal reflection, fasting, and atonement.

The late UU Rev. Forrest Church famously defined religion as "our human response to the dual reality of being alive and having to die. Knowing we must die [he said], we question what life means. Where did I come from? Who am I? Where am I going? What is life's purpose?"

Dying is not unexpected. We've known we're going to die since childhood. We may not think about it much, though, except when it's thrust upon us. When we lose a loved one, our grief can surprise us. Our memories crystallize into new understandings, new appreciation for what that person meant to us.

Similarly, meeting the fact of our *own* mortality calls us to pay attention. When we've lived to a great age or when, at any age, we learn that our days are numbered, that awareness can help us reflect and take action. It often inspires people to tend to issues important to them. If blessed with the foreknowledge that our time is nigh, we can say things that need to be said. We can say thank you. We can say I'm sorry. We can ask, can you forgive me? We can say I forgive you.

Some of us live with a continual reminder of our mortality. Writer Jeannie Ewing describes bringing up her "medically fragile child whose condition is nebulous and lifespan uncertain....It is a constant in our life [she writes] that death could be waiting for us...any time, without

warning or reason. As a result, I am keenly aware of the dying and all the ways death present opportunities for me to live and love more fully the moment I've been given now."¹

Every one of us at any time has that opportunity, "to live and love more fully the moment we've been given now."

The wheel of the year ever turns, and again it's Black History Month. In these turbulent times, this season is ripe for reflection and action. Two stories from this past year come to mind. Stories of regret that rankle. Stories I wish could be replaced, this time more artfully. (My dad used to say, "Never say 'should have.' Because you didn't. Instead, say 'Next time.'")

The first story took place a year ago on my way to a presentation about race in Portsmouth. Both of us late, a young African American woman and I met on the sidewalk, looking for the entrance. In this town, seeing a black person is an event. Instead of having the wherewithal to take her blackness in stride, it's all I saw. I remember feeling a heightened response, almost excited by it. And I confess to making the classic, embarrassing, racist mistake of taking her for another young black woman. I asked...and no, it wasn't she – a moment of shame that's hard to forget. Here was another clueless white person not seeing *her* at all, not giving her the space, the respect that I take for granted when I'm out in the world, my white privilege affording me the cover of invisibility, not to mention the comfort of belonging.

The second story happened last spring when my husband and I accompanied our daughter to a symposium at the Kennedy School in Cambridge on Blackness and Power. We were among a handful of white people that memorable day – stimulating, eye-opening, and humbling. Laura, there to study other things, had also taken a course on Race and Class in America. Unexpectedly, it took her down a road she'd not explored and changed her forever. Today she looks for and sees everywhere racism and systems of oppression. And she feels a responsibility to do what she can to make a difference.

So when she pointed out her professor across the room during one of the breaks, I wanted to say something to him in the way of gratitude, to somehow convey the impact of his work on her. My main regret is a word I used. Did I say she'd learned so much, she'd changed, her goals had shifted, she was lit up with outrage at what she'd learned, she was hungry for justice? No, I described her as "woke" – an appropriate word elsewhere, but in that setting, so wrong. In the rearview mirror it feels like cultural appropriation.

Of course he was gracious. He had no choice – people of color live their lives graciously not reacting to such missteps, keeping the peace, blunting more honest responses. Today, I imagine a letter to him: "Dear Professor, Forgive me. Thank you. Words cannot express, sir. I will remember. Next time. May justice prevail. I pray for you. May you and the ones you love and all people of color thrive. May you be well and safe. May you be content and at peace."

¹ Jeannie Ewing. "Why Does Lent Call Us to Remember Death?" Catholic Exchange, 20 February 2020, at <https://catholicexchange.com/why-does-lent-call-us-to-remember-death>

The learning? Not to make that mistake again. Not to use that word. And most definitely to try again. To rein in my racist do-gooder impulse, to control *my* need to speak, and to try in the future to meet such moments quietly, gently, with humility. Reflection and action.

When things don't work out as planned or as hoped, they become invitations into the unknown. Invitations into discovery and growth. Where, I like to ask, is the holy in these stories this Black History Month?

For me, the nudge of the holy started with the repeated reviewing of these shameful moments. The self-evaluation piece. The examining. The challenge there is to not get stuck in one's own reactions – that's known as "white fragility," when we make a racial injustice a story about us and our reactions rather than about the harm done to the victims. The challenge instead is to see that unexpected moment, that disappointment in ourselves, as an invitation. Not an "I should have" but a "Next time I will." The learning is in looking forward. Setting a goal. Resolving to learn and, in learning, to change.

Let us be grateful for our lofty principles. At the same time, let us be vigilant about how easy it is to miss the mark in acting on them. I think of the time a friend came out to me and how frightened she was of how I might react, how much power, in a way, her vulnerability gave me. As if I had any power in her self-actualization. "Do you hate me now?" she asked. Bewildered, I remember saying, "What? Of course not. What do you mean?"

We must also take care not to miss the mark around the language we use. While we might believe ourselves to be respectful of every person's chosen gender expression, when someone has the courage to state their preferences regarding their pronouns, our dug-in understandings can get in the way. Perhaps uncomfortable with the intimacy of what's been shared, we might react with an insensitive joke, only to be informed later of its hurtful effect on that person. In the presence of the unexpected, we must take care.

Walking our talk – and inevitably falling down and trying again – calls for field expediency. Mustering what we have in the moment and doing the best with what we've got. Sometimes we rise to the occasion and do ourselves (and do our faith) proud. Other times, lacking the tools we need, the words we hear ourselves say make us cringe.

Let's not get caught up in shame. Rather, let's use these moments as teachers. Let's turn them into goals for next time around. As people of conscience, we are here to learn and grow.

The wheel of the year ever turns. May we look upon events that come around the same time every year as holy opportunities to live and love more fully. Let us be grateful for the evaluation of our work, for the ancient rites of taking stock of one's life, for anniversaries that mark important milestones. In closing, let us remember to accept with gratitude each day's invitation into the unexpected.

So may it be.