

“Noise Reduction”

By the Rev. Julia Hamilton

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READING

“For Citizenship”

by John O’Donohue

In these times when anger
Is turned into anxiety
And someone has stolen
The horizons and the mountains,

Our small emperors on parade
Never expect our indifference
To disturb their nakedness
They keep their heads down
And their eyes gleam with reflection
From Aluminum economic ground,

The media wraps everything
In a cellophane of sound,
And the ghost surface of the virtual
Overlays the breathing earth.

The industry of distraction
Makes us forget
That we live in a universe

We have become converts
To the religion of stress
And its deity of progress.

That we may have courage
To turn aside from it all
And come to kneel down before the poor,
To discover what we must do,

How to turn anxiety
Back into anger,
How to find our way home.

SERMON

“Noise Reduction”

When I read that John O’Donohue poem, I immediately thought to myself, “Yes, That’s it! That’s exactly what I’ve been feeling. Someone has stolen the horizons and the mountains!”

It feels like it’s been so long since I’ve been able to see something like a horizon, something more than just a few feet in front of me at any given moment. I’ve been stuck in the here and now, but not in the good Buddhist-mindfulness kind of way, more like in a reactive “Oh no, what are we dealing with now!” kind of way. It’s the kind of reactivity that makes me check the news first thing in the morning, before I even have any coffee, just to try and keep up with the trauma of the world.

I start filling my day up with sand, instead of taking time to make room for the rocks, first.

Do you remember, during the fire, when the ash and smoke was so thick that you couldn’t see past the end of the block? And at the same time, we had to wear those masks, the n95 masks that were a bit claustrophobic.

The smoke, the masks, never being outside for more than a few minutes. It was layer after layer, shrinking the world to the inside of your house or your car, the inside of the mask, nothing to see beyond a strange orange-yellow fog, no sunrise, no sunset. The mountains were gone, the ocean was invisible.

It was as if the fire was a metaphor come to life - it made tangible something that I’ve felt a lot over the past year or so:

It’s been hard to see what’s really going on with all the thick smoke in the air from the fires burning all around us.

Because there are fires burning all around us – fires that are personal as well as national and international. Our lives, in the best of times, often have one or two fires burning – illness or injury, job stress or addiction, grief or loneliness. Every single one of us will face challenges in our turn, and these personal fires can occupy a large part of our mind and heart when they are burning. And we might be able to handle this, to see our way clear of the smoke.

But then, layered on top of our individual struggles, there are the communal concerns, the liquid earth, the systems of injustice that must be changed, the wrongs that must be righted, the planet that must be saved - the political and the catastrophic overlaying with the personal at every turn. And in this era of constant communication and instant information, well, I am not the first person to point out that the poor human brain is no match for Google analytics. The newsfeeds and viral marketing systems have us in their sights, showing us content that has been designed to poke us right in the amygdala, right in the emotional decision-making centers of our brain. We are thrown back and forth between

headlines of disaster, both human made and natural, and funny videos of our pets that have gone viral, ping-ponging between fear and kittens.

It is no wonder that being overwhelmed and under-joyed is the basic state of things, these days.

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“...We have become converts to the religion of stress.”

If we are converts to the religion of stress, then burnout must be one of our sacraments.

When I ask people how they are doing, many of you say that you are feeling Burned Out. Back to that fire metaphor again, huh? Literally and figuratively, we are feeling burned out.

It used to be that burnout was classified as something primarily related to work, but I have to say that I hear it from a lot of retired people, too. It is no longer just something that happens to people who are putting in too many hours at the office. All of us are susceptible. Our kids and our elders, our rich friends and our poor friends, our single friends and our partnered friends - burnout is on the rise.

The World Health Organization’s International Classification of Disease describes burnout as “A state of vital exhaustion”

According to the MacArthur Research Network at UC San Francisco, “Vital Exhaustion” has three defining characteristics: (1) feelings of excessive fatigue and lack of energy, (2) increasing irritability, and (3) feelings of demoralization ...Vital Exhaustion is a mental state at which people arrive when their resources for adapting to stress are broken down.”

So what do we do about this?

In my sermon last week, I talked about a few things that studies showed helped people and organizations be resilient, be more able to bounce back from trauma. One of the three things mentioned was having a sense of meaning and purpose. If a person or organization has a sense of purpose that transcends moment-by-moment existence, then they are more resilient.

So the first thing to do, it seems, in the face of burnout, is get back in touch with what gives your life meaning. What grounds you, what inspires you, what makes you stronger when you hold onto it? Where is your horizon? Or, as the question is asked in the Psalms of the Hebrew Scriptures, "I lift up my eyes to the mountains - from where will my help come?"

It is an ancient question: What gives me strength of purpose when things get rough?

The Hebrew Psalms had a clear answer: "My help comes from the Lord, maker of heaven and earth." However, because we are Unitarian Universalists, I'm afraid that unlike the ancient prophets, I have no easy answer to give you. The lifelong search for truth and meaning is one of our principles - We each have to find the answer to this question for ourselves.

But how? What do you do when the very mountains have been stolen from your sight? When the horizon itself, once a source of inspiration, shrinks into haze and loses all definition? How, amidst all of the things clamoring for our attention, how do we discern that which gives real meaning and shape to our lives?

When the smoke and ash from the fire filled the air around us, when it started to seep under our doors and get into our lungs, even inside our houses, when we had to stay in town and survive, what did we do?

Well, one thing we did was got filters. Air filters. I know I bought one. The particulate matter had really started to get to me, kicking up my normally very mild asthma, making me feel terrible. I tried to tough it out for a while, but once I got an air filter running, I really did feel so much better. It was much nicer to breath without all that stuff in the air, clogging up my lungs and giving me a headache every morning. And there were all kinds of tutorials going around about how to build an air filter with a box fan and the flat square filters you get for your furnace at home depot.

Filters. Maybe we need to put some time and energy into how we filter the onslaught of input that we receive.

On the front of your order of service, there is an image of a sound wave. The first half is unfiltered sound - it's full of noise, all the fuzziness around the sound, the background noises, the static from the microphone. But when a sound technician runs it through a filter, it reduces all the unnecessary stuff and leaves you with a clean, clear sound instead. Just like the air going through the particle filter sorts out all the unnecessary bits and leaves us with just the stuff we can breathe.

If we can't control the industry of distraction in which we live, if we can't stop a tweeter from tweeting, or a Russian spam bot from creating fake news, what we can do is cultivate a strong set of filters that allows us to discern what is important and what is not. What is healthy for us and what is not. What is useful and true, and what is harmful and false. We

can examine the filters we already have in place, our own biases and judgements, and determine if they are working for us or if we need to swap them out for something new. Sometimes it's not a question of finding a new filter, but of cleaning or replacing the ones we installed long ago and forgot about.

Perhaps one of religion's biggest tasks through the ages has been to help people work with filters that shape our lives into lives of meaning and purpose. Buddhism has the eightfold path. There are the five pillars of Islam. There are the ten commandments, of course. The Quakers are fond of asking three things: Is it True? Is it Necessary? Is it Kind? And even us Unitarian Universalists, although we have no creed or statement of faith, there are seven principles that have been part of what guides and shapes our community. These are all filters for life, ways that we can modulate what comes in and what goes out, cleaning up and clarifying and focusing our life's energy.

There are practices that can help us strengthen our filters as well, practices that are common across many religious traditions. Meditation, prayer, holy silence, retreats, walks in nature - these things all act to reduce the static around us and leave our hearts and minds with more clarity.

In many ways, I think of Sunday morning here as an hour-long filter, a way of sifting through the week, or month, and letting the important pieces settle while casting away the things that do not serve.

I want to be clear that when I talk of finding effective filters for the onslaught of the world, I am not talking about turning a blind eye to suffering. Filters are morally neutral - it's our job to discern an ethical path. You can put on a filter that allows you to walk past someone on the street every day and not ever really see them. There are filters that obscure reality, that soften the edges like those old glamour shots from the mall. I'm not talking about rose colored glasses.

I am looking for practices that deepen and discern, not dismiss.

One of the religious practices that I have been more and more convinced is a survival tool, just like that n95 mask, is the practice of taking a Sabbath - time intentionally set aside for disconnecting from the day to day - unwrapping yourself from "the cellophane of sound, the ghost surface of the virtual" to use the words of the earlier poem. A Sabbath is a way to get back in touch with the breathing earth. A way to get back in touch with what is underneath all the noise.

There is a group that started in New York but is now nationwide called Reboot, a Jewish collective grounded in the idea of re-imagining and recreating traditional Jewish practices, in particular the idea of taking a Sabbath day, to, as they put it, "Take a break. Call a timeout. Find some balance. Recharge."

As a way of encouraging people of all faiths to experiment with the idea of a Sabbath, in 2010 they launched the "National Day of Unplugging". This year, the National Day of

Unplugging is from sundown on March 9 until sunset on March 10th. Participants are encouraged to put their cellphones and other electronics aside for that day, to get outside, to gather with friends, to share a meal, light some candles, play some non-electronic games, help out a neighbor, or find some time for silence and meditation.

As Anne Lamott said, “Almost everything will work again if you unplug it for a few minutes, including you.”

So how about it? Do you think you could unplug for a day?

What I appreciate about the Sabbath concept is that it is not about removing yourself completely from the stream of modern life – it’s just one day, or just a couple of hours if that’s all you can manage. It is not about creating such tight filters that you never read the news, or never scroll through Facebook, or never watch a silly cat video from time to time. These things are fine, in moderation. The Sabbath, and other practices like meditation, prayer, or mindfulness, are not about creating a bubble around you to prevent any suffering from leaking through. Rather, these practices are about noise reduction, reducing distortion so that a more understandable sound emerges. They are about gaining clarity about what really matters, helping you find that core sense of meaning and purpose so that when things do get difficult, when the fires burn too close or too fast, you do not get burned out as well.

Unplugging from the industry of distraction gives us the opportunity to remember that we live in a universe. That claustrophobic sense of confinement in the haze of daily life will dissipate, and we will be able to lift our eyes to the mountains once again.

If we can find ways to do this – if we have the courage and the discipline to find and keep our filters running, despite all the forces that want us to stay distracted and disheartened, if we can do this, it builds in us the capacity to respond to the world with more resilience and joy and creativity. It gives us the strength to kneel down and learn from those hurt most by this system, without getting burned out by the pain. And yes, it allows us to reclaim a clear and powerful anger when it is necessary, instead of being paralyzed by anxiety.

Most importantly, we can reclaim the horizon. And once we can see that horizon once again, we may just find our way home.