

Renewing the Spirit in an Age of **Overwhelm**



Sunday, April 14, 2019

Rev. Dr. Roger D. Jones

Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento

Hymns: #1010, We Give Thanks for this Precious Day; I Am Willing (Holly Near words and music, projected on screen); #121, We'll Build a Land

Reflection by Larry Boles

Reading

Mohsin Hamid is a novelist in Pakistan. Two years ago on "Fresh Air," an interview program on National Public Radio, Mohsin Hamid said this:

Every parent, wherever you live in the world, there are fears that we have for our children. What happens when we drop them off to school? What happens, you know, when they're making their way home? What happens when we're not with them? And in a way, every parent is sort of dependent on the benevolence of the society around them to take care of their children.

And we get these reminders that maybe [the world] isn't as benevolent as we would like. But we're sort of helpless in the face of that. And that's for me, a call to engage and to be sort of politically active because society requires each of us to intervene.

This is something which living in Pakistan, perhaps, has taught me—and, you know, we live in a world where there is a constant feed from social media, the news, etc., of things that can scare us. And we become so anxious because human beings are meant—are designed to be sensitized to dangerous stuff. You know, you get a bad review as a writer, you remember it

for 10 years. You get a hundred good reviews, you forget them all. You say hello to a hundred people in the city and it doesn't mean anything to you. One racist comment... and it sticks with you a decade.

We keep the negative stuff because it's the negative stuff that's going to, you know, potentially kill us. That fin in the water—maybe it is a shark. That yellow thing behind a tree,—maybe it is a lion. You need to be scared. But contemporary culture in Pakistan, just like in America, is continuously hitting us with scary stuff. And so we are utterly anxious. I think that it's very important to resist that anxiety, to think of ways of resisting the constant inflow of negative feelings, not to become depoliticized as a result but to actually work actively to bring into being an optimistic future.

And for me, writing books and being... someone who's politically active is part of that. I don't want to be anxious on my day-to-day life. I want to try to imagine a future I'd like to live in and then write books and do things that, in my own small way, make it more likely that [my imagined future] will come to exist.

We are utterly anxious. [But] I think that it's very important to resist that anxiety. [Resist the] constant inflow of negative feelings [not by withdrawing or ignoring problems, but by working actively to make things better,] to try to imagine a better future ...and do things that, in my own small way, make it more likely that that future will come to exist.¹

Sermon

We are living in an Age of Overwhelm. In this country and around the world, people are depleted, distracted and on the brink of despair. This is not just how *I* feel; it's confirmed by experts! One of them is Laura van Dernoot Lipsky, founder of the Trauma Stewardship Institute. For more than 30 years, she has been working with people who have been through trauma and those who feel the effects of trauma by helping survivors of it. She's also an activist for environmental justice and racial justice, and the mother of two children.

The results of our many traumas— personal and social traumas—Lipsky says, are widespread anxiety, animosity and fear. Overwhelm denies us a sense of freedom and choice; it saps our well-being, steals our joy.

I'm thinking of the lament of the Holly Near song we just sang: "There is hurting in my family, and there is sorrow in my town; There is panic all across the nation, and there is wailing the whole world 'round."

While political division and strife have always been part of this country's life, now there's even more cause to fear a rejection of Constitutional principles by the U.S. government. Many of us mourn the loss of any sense of human decency, mercy, or fair play in this country. The epidemic of gun violence and the many revelations of sexual assault are heartbreaking. So are climate change, natural disasters and the mass extinction of species. Plenty of reasons to feel depleted, to feel despair.

Just knowing about these traumas and tragedies can be overwhelming. Feeling them up close must be even more devastating.

One source of overwhelm to a great many people in the United States is poverty. Poverty has grown to envelop nearly 40% of the population, while economic dislocations have made many of the rest of us feel constantly vulnerable. What's more distracting than having to make decisions between paying the utility bill or the rent, between buying food or going to see the doctor? When your child is sick, do you stay home and lose wages, risk leaving them at home alone, or send them to school and hope for the best? Even if you are not poor, parenting in these times seems ever more demanding, challenging and complicated—even downright scary.

Distractions, bad habits and other burdens can creep up on us. Things that we thought would make life easier also can be distractions which drain our serenity. So many of us, for example, are never without our smart phones. On average, people tap or swipe a smart phone 2,600 times a day.² We jump to its beeps and vibrations, responding to notifications of text messages, pictures, Facebook postings and the comments of others, or others LIKING what *we* have posted. When you want to respond to another person's posting on Facebook, you click LIKE and a little thumbs-up icon appears by their post. You can also click a little red heart, a sad face, a smiley face, and other signs of your support. When he worked for the Facebook corporation, Justin Rosenstein was the software

engineer who created the LIKE button. He regrets it now. He worries about its addictive nature, about the serotonin rush each LIKE provides. He says the LIKES are "bright dings of pseudo-pleasure that can be as hollow as they are seductive."

Laura van Dernoot Lipsky writes: "Despite more technologies aimed at connecting people, ideas and information, [we now] experience greater ... social and personal disconnection" than before. Of course, I can think of examples where crucial information would not have been exchanged without social media like Facebook. Many fruitful connections have been made through online social media. So it's a paradox that something that can help us to connect has coincided with a higher degree of disconnection.

Lipsky says teens and young adults in particular have told her "that one of the most harmful aspects of social media is the unceasing comparing of themselves with others— [with those they know and with people] they may never meet." "The constant tug of *what's out there*," she says, is keeping us from appreciating who we are, what we have, and what we have control over.

It's so easy to be distracted, and so easy to be reactive. Sitting alone with a smart phone or computer, we can say things on email or social media that many of us would be embarrassed to say in public—like oversharing personal information, making dismissive insults, even attacking people verbally.

A cartoon from the *New Yorker* magazine shows two men in tunics, on horseback, with round shields by their waist. Faced against them yards away are hundreds of soldiers lined up in ranks, with shields and spears at the ready. A catapult in the back is loaded with a boulder and is ready to spring toward this pair. One horseman says to the other: "Maybe you shouldn't send out emails when you're tired." I agree. I even try to avoid *reading* emails when I'm tired. Also, at night I don't want to be exposed to something online that would stop me from winding down for bed. But habits creep up on me. I guess that's how bad habits work. You don't just decide you'll give up control to some wasteful or harmful activity. They creep up and slip into your life.

The other night I read Lipsky’s advice to avoid looking at the screen of a computer or phone before going to bed, and especially not to look at the screen while in bed. Likewise, don’t look at the phone first thing in the morning, she says. I shook my head in wonder that people could be so deeply under the spell of their smart phone. Just after six in the morning, as my phone’s alarm rang and buzzed, I reached for the phone to turn it off. I looked at it and started scrolling down. “I’ve got email!” I thought. I opened the inbox to see what had come in for me overnight. Then I laughed. “Wow! I’m doing it myself. I’m barely awake and I’m distracted already!”



Lipsky invites us to notice times and places when we are not connected—and to catch ourselves with compassion. However, when we are overwhelmed, she says, “we cannot reliably gauge if we are doing harm.” The harm could include the way we’re driving if we’re distracted, or the way we speak to others if we’re depleted. It can be helpful if we have people in our lives who can point such things out to us. This can be done with a simple statement and question, such as: “I’m noticing that you’re more distracted than usual. You’re doing things you wouldn’t normally do. How are you feeling?” Of course, if others are going to be brave enough to ask us this question, it could be helpful for them to know that we would consider their question calmly and take some time to respond with grace. *Easier said than done!* Responding with grace calls for intention—and for practice.

Given how sneaky habits can be, it matters for us to try not to be isolated. Being overwhelmed narrows our sense of options, so our supportive connections important for our sense of serenity and freedom. Whether it’s through family, friends, community, or congregation—connections are crucial. When we are beset by confusion, worry or fear, Lipsky says, it can be a great gift for someone

to point out what we are not able to see: “The way you feel—that’s what overwhelm feels like!”

By our presence with others, by listening, and showing empathy, we can encourage one another. Encouragement can be a simple and obvious observation, like: “I know you’re going through a lot. These are normal feelings for an event or an experience that isn’t a normal one!”

Some of the best advice I’ve received but which I don’t follow nearly enough is: “Do one thing at a time.” The choices and challenges of life today make it even harder to do this. Technology invites us to think we can do more than one thing at a time with no sacrifice of attention or presence or safety. Or maybe I shouldn’t blame technology. Too often I go out the door, holding things in both arms, thinking about something that happened the day before or what’s coming up later. Out the door, it’s only three steps down, but they’re wide steps and they are *concrete*. If I tripped and fell off them, the place where I’d fall is concrete as well. Every time I stumble and drop things and almost fall down, I realize how costly my distraction could be.

In the age of overwhelm, Lipsky says, we have to reclaim the liberty of being intentional, of living with intention. This ought to be how we go out the door, navigate a scary world, or negotiate the demands of living together as people under one roof.

When life is crowding in, or going too fast, Step back. Lipsky confesses that as parents, she and her spouse don’t always model the techniques that her expertise would indicate as helpful ones. Yet they learn from their children. One time, she says, one of their little girls “took a step back.” Lipsky writes: “It was in the middle of a full family heated moment with a lot of momentum when we heard her young voice say, ‘I just need a minute.’ We all stopped. She didn’t go anywhere; she didn’t do anything visibly.” That pause made their discussion “more civil.”

The little girl took a step back. She did it for herself, but she brought everyone else along, helped them take a pause and take a breath.

“Now [they are] teenagers, [and] the girls balance their strong feelings with what is appropriate behavior in a stressful situation.” For example, they take “a second and reach for a half-

eaten snack from their backpack, roll down the car window, or walk over to pet their dog.”

Lipsky’s book *The Age of Overwhelm* has the subtitle: *Strategies for the Long Haul*. That’s an important thing when feeling daunted about the state of the world—remember the long haul, the long term. Live in the present, but keep a long-term perspective.

When feeling confronted with so much, where do we start? When feeling overwhelmed, what’s the way out? Lipsky says: “Do something. Do One Thing.”

“Less is more,” she writes. “We don’t have to do everything at once.... It’s not sustainable. But do one thing. Do it for a while. Then add something else.” When feeling overwhelmed, perhaps the first thing to do is to take a step back.

Lipsky recommends a number of spiritual practices to help us from being smothered under the weight of overwhelm. She says we can learn ways to walk side by side with overwhelm—we can see it, but we don’t let it control us or smother us.

Her main advice is to act with intention—be present for what you are feeling, consider what your choices are, and make a choice consciously. For example, it will take intention to reduce a habitual distraction. Choose one thing to stop or change. It could be cutting back on how much bad news you’re exposed to. It could be cutting back from staying up too late at night.

Or it could be to choose one thing to *add* to your life. It could be more exercise, even walking or stretching more. Or it could be choosing to spend some time outside. She says: “We don’t have to scale mountains... to benefit from being outside. [Just] going outside for a few minutes, looking at a tree, and observing the light filtering through [the] leaves, can regulate your nervous system and allow you to be more present.” Don’t wait till you are feeling overwhelmed to do this, but if you are feeling that way, it can be a good break.

Every suggestion Lipsky makes, every practice we might consider, falls under the overall advice of being intentional. Intention is the practice that underlies all the others. She says: “Intention is like the banks of a river [directing our flow]—“the banks of a river through which grace can flow.”

She advises rather basic spiritual practices: pausing, paying attention, naming our gratitude, and being generous. We can resist the age of overwhelm simply by listing or naming reasons for gratitude in our life and our world. Life’s not perfect, not easy, but we can look for the gifts that do exist. You know, if we waited to feel gratitude until we had everything we wanted or thought we needed, it would be a long wait. Meanwhile, we would be denying ourselves the benefits and gifts of gratitude, gifts which include a sense of well-being, hope and possibility.

The other practice is being generous intentionally. A sense of overwhelm distracts us from those aspects of life over which we do have control and choice. The practice of being generous is a concrete assertion of our self-control, our freedom, our ability to make a difference, our connections to others, and our dignity. The practice of generosity is way to resist overwhelm. Gratitude and generosity are practices which we can choose by our intentions. Intention comes first.

The writer Mohsin Hamid has indicated his intentions. He said he has chosen to resist the “constant inflow of negative feelings” not by withdrawing or ignoring problems, but by working actively to make things better. His intention, he says, is to “try to imagine a better future ...and do things that, in my own small way, make it more likely that that future will come to exist.”

Lipsky says: “Our body, mind and spirit can only keep up with so much.” In a world of overload, it’s normal to feel overwhelmed. But we can stop, step back, be intentional, and do one thing at a time. We can use technology as a tool, rather than letting it use us, the way a bad habit uses us. When considering what to do or what to say in a given situation, we can ask whether doing so will enhance a sense of connection or erode connection. This is what intention means. Taking the long view, naming our gratitude, showing generosity—any of these is possible if we set an intention. Taking time to be intentional is a gift to ourselves and others. Intention can help us navigate the age of overwhelm. “Intention is like the banks of a river—the banks of a river through which grace can flow.”

In the coming week, I invite you to join me in choosing one thing to stop doing, temporarily, one thing where you'll give it a break and see how that feels. Or make a choice of *adding* something—one thing, for a week. Like a daily reading of poetry or a spiritual writer or sacred scripture. Or getting outside every day or sitting in silence for 10 minutes or 5 minutes or whatever you might choose to do.

Remember the advice: Do something. But do only one thing. Bring your intention to choosing it. Experiment with it and observe yourself. Sometime later, you may decide to add something else or decide to stop doing something else.

But trying to do everything is the path to frustration. Choosing to do one thing at a time could be the path to freedom.

Each of us has gifts to offer the world and the people around us. We start by showing up. The world needs us. The world needs you. Let us be present for this world. Let us be present for the gift of life and grateful for it, and generous with it. Let us be present for life. Amen.

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Personal Reflection by Larry Boles

About a decade ago, my wife Mimi was diagnosed with cancer. We were very fortunate that it was stage 1, which meant it had not spread anywhere and was contained in a football-sized tumor that was able to be removed. She would then undergo chemotherapy and that would be that. And it all went smooth. She had the surgery, and in fact it was self-contained.

However, we had an 8-year old and a 6-year old daughter at the time, and that made the whole experience harder. Jasmine, our oldest, was the easy one. She knew what was happening, but she also knew that she got to spend time with Auntie Kae, and Auntie Kae was and is the absolute best at making cookies, so life was pretty good for Jasmine. Jade was (and is) a bit harder to please. Auntie Kae was gracious enough to spend several nights at our house so I could spend those nights in the hospital with Mimi.

Jade was tearful in her response to this. She said something like this: "I don't know if I'm losing Mommy, and you, Daddy, are just gone and all I get is Auntie Kae!"

She was right, of course. I was thinking of Mimi's survival, of her well-being. I was afraid of losing her. But this child of 6 didn't yet have the tools to see that. I was up shit creek without a paddle! I had to let go of something here. Now you probably have some ideas about what I could do in response to this. But I want to point out that I was in la-la land. Mimi is the best thing that has ever happened to me, and I was in danger of losing her. My girls are the most precious thing on earth to me. And I needed to keep them satisfied. While this was happening I had to be something more than what I was. I had to be the rock. I had to be calm, cool, and collected while my world was unravelling.

What I did was what any Unitarian Universalist would do. I meditated. And this left me calm, cool, and collected. And after I had meditated. I still did not know what to do. But I did have some clarity. I talked to Mimi, who was doing amazingly well. I explained to her that I could stay late, but that Jade needed me that night, and I wouldn't be spending that night with her. She was, of course, very understanding. Jade and Jasmine spent that night at home with me and Jade was, of course, very understanding as well. I don't think the meditation itself brought the answer to me. I think it was more like the answer was there, and I wasn't slowing myself down enough to see it. I still have a great relationship with my daughter, and I am so grateful that I have Mimi in my life.

¹Laura van Dernoot Lipsky, *The Age of Overwhelm: Strategies for the Long Haul* (Oakland, Calif. 2018: Berrett-Koehler Publishers), adapted, 80.

²*Ibid.*, 67. All other quotations are from this book.