

Gators, Sharks, and Riptides

Rev. David A. Morris

Unitarian Universalist Congregation of the Outer Banks

August 12, 2018

During the two weeks in the summer of 2015 when I was driving from California to my new home in the Outer Banks, there were several nationally publicized shark attacks out here. Friends from the West Coast thoughtfully made sure I heard about all of them, forwarding me news stories with useful comments like “Yikes! Is this where you’re going to live?”

I reminded them as kindly as possible that just nine months before there had been a magnitude 6.0 earthquake in Napa, about 30 miles away along the same fault line I lived on in the San Francisco Bay Area, and that they were currently living through one of the worst wildfire seasons on record—one that would eventually finish out with more than 8,700 fires in California alone, scorching just short of a million acres. Everyplace is dangerous in some way, I said. Besides, I said, every single day in the summer there were more than 350,000 people in the Outer Banks, and almost every day not one of them got bitten by sharks. It wasn’t really a major worry.

Which is not to say that I’m not pretty alert for the sight of a fin or a shadow whenever I’m in the water.

We live in a place where nature can remind us very suddenly that she does not always have our safety, comfort, and well-being in mind.

Back in May, the papers were full of the news that a 10-foot alligator had been caught, tagged, and released right near here in the Kitty Hawk Landing neighborhood. People were advised to keep an eye on their children and pets, and to check their swimming pools before jumping in.

This year, sadly, we’ve had a number of fatal drownings, most of them due to people getting caught in rip currents.

The routine arrival of nor’easters, tropical storms, and hurricanes that we have to be prepared for is yet another familiar danger for us, and of course the constant presence of the shipwrecks just offshore reinforces that the sea is a powerful and sometimes unforgiving neighbor.

For those of us uneasy with the reptile world, the fact that our sounds, marshes, canals and moist maritime forests make a wonderful home for snakes can evoke quite a wide range of emotional responses. On Friday I took advantage of the wonderful path that Dennis Tromba has cleared of poison ivy to find my way behind the playground to the beautiful canal access on the edge of our grounds, and I have to admit that I walked very cautiously, and when the frogs suddenly started jumping, so did I.

We’re beset by dangers, it seems, and when our attention is called to them we can suddenly feel a lot more nervous about things we wouldn’t usually give a second thought. When the alligator was in the news, I heard people saying, “Well, I guess it’s not safe to swim in the sound anymore,” and I couldn’t help thinking, You know, that alligator is about 10 feet long, the chances are pretty good it’s been around for years. The water is exactly as safe today as it was the day before the critter was tagged.

The thing about living in a place where there are some well-known perils is that we’re reminded pretty regularly that danger is a constant, simple reality of life. There’s no such thing as a life of complete safety. If we let dangers define our choices, we let fear define our life.

Of course, this isn't true just of simple everyday choices like whether to go for a walk in the woods or take a swim in the ocean or go kayaking in the canals. Risk is a basic component of living. Life is precious, and it is finite, and sometimes it's fragile. The more richly and deeply we live, the more we have at risk. It's easy and natural for us to learn to be afraid. There's a reading in our hymnal taken from a 1978 poem by Audre Lorde called "A Litany of Survival." She captures the dilemma well, and points toward a way to live with it. She says, in part,

"And when the sun rises we are afraid
it might not remain
when the sun sets we are afraid
it might not rise in the morning
when our stomachs are full we are afraid
of indigestion
when our stomachs are empty we are afraid
we may never eat again
when we are loved we are afraid
love will vanish
when we are alone we are afraid
love will never return
and when we speak we are afraid
our words will not be heard
nor welcomed
but when we are silent
we are still afraid
So it is better to speak
remembering
we were never meant to survive."

There are so many ways we can be hurt. Our bodies, our beliefs, our view of the world, our feelings—everything about us is vulnerable to the blows and setbacks and challenges life can send our way. We fear the hurts, we'd rather not be vulnerable—especially if we're caught up in what Lorde calls, in another part of her poem, "the illusion of some safety to be found." But surrendering to fear doesn't make it go away. "When we are silent we are still afraid."

I remember the first time I saw this reading in the hymnal; I thought it was kind of grim. "We were never meant to survive," I thought, "that seems . . . pessimistic." But I realized, eventually, that there's a difference between "we were never meant to survive" and "we're all going to die, so nothing matters!" Audre Lorde's line is meant as an invitation to embrace our vulnerability to the dangers and pains of living, and to move toward them, knowing that the way of risk is the only path to experiencing life's joyous adventure, the only path to creating the world we want to live in, the only path to finding love.

This doesn't mean we should never feel fear. The Tibetan Buddhist teacher Dzigar Kongtrul Rinpoche says "Fear and worry are understandable at times. It would be stupid not to be concerned for our personal well-being and selfish not to be concerned for others. Feeling concern is a natural part of human goodness. But when it prevents us from accepting our life, fear is crippling. . . . Facing fear means facing your life, and facing your life means *living* your life."

Embracing risk and vulnerability doesn't mean encouraging recklessness. Those who've lived here for a while know there are ways of minimizing the danger of shark attacks at the beach; we know how to be alert in the water and the woods. We learn, if we're wise, how to spot a rip current, and how best to get ourselves out of one if we get caught. We know how to prepare for our inevitable storms and the best ways to ride them out; we each have our own calculus of risk to decide when it's best to accept evacuation. Even as we know there's no such thing as absolute safety no matter what skills we have, we also know that it's worthwhile to be sensible.

We can meet the many fears and risks of our lives with that same sense of developing skills and making wise choices. Every loss we experience, every effort that goes awry, every relationship that founders, every circumstance that diverts us from the goals we're hoping to achieve carries lessons and learnings, and opportunities to gain in strength and courage for the next effort. As social scientist Brene Brown puts it, ". . . the process of regaining our emotional footing in the midst of struggle is where our courage is tested and our values are forged. Rising strong after a fall is how we cultivate wholeheartedness in our lives; it's the process that teaches us the most about who we are."

In Unitarian Universalist circles, especially in our recent conversations about white supremacy, there's been a movement away from the idea of creating "safe spaces" where we can encounter difficult truths. What are needed more, we've begun to realize, are "brave spaces." In brave spaces we can acknowledge that dismantling white dominance is going to demand some hard realizations, and it's going to have real costs, both for those of us who have unknowingly benefitted from it and for those of us who have learned to navigate the oppression for their very survival. It's going to require a willingness to make ourselves vulnerable to the kind of backlash, resistance, and even physical and material risk that have always been part of the lives of people in marginalized communities in America.

This weekend is the anniversary of an event that made it clear how high the stakes are, and how important it is for us to learn to live with risk and vulnerability if we want to make real change in our society. The violence of the white nationalist assault on Charlottesville one year ago made it clear that there are no safe sidelines we can withdraw to, no islands of purely civil discourse where we can hope to ride out the rough weather as long as some Americans believe that other Americans are not fully human, not entitled to the same rights and privileges and freedoms, and are prepared to use any means to advance their belief.

The courage we need to meet the rising tide of white nationalism and injustice in our nation is the same as the courage we need to make change in our own Association and congregations; it's the same courage we need to meet the needs of our own individual experience as workers, explorers, creators, companions, lovers, family members and friends; it's the same courage we need to get out and throw ourselves into the beautiful, life-giving, dangerous environment we live in.

We need the courage to be fully alive, the courage to embrace our own vulnerability and accept the risk that we may fail, or fall, or encounter something too powerful or dangerous for us deal with. We need the courage to bring the best that we have to whatever we encounter, knowing that it may not be enough, but trusting that we are part of a larger life, a larger whole that will sustain us no matter what happens.

Spiritual teacher and author Sharon Salzberg writes: "The English word 'courage' has the same etymological root as the French *Coeur*, which means 'heart.' To have courage. . . is to be full of heart.

With courage we openly acknowledge what we can't control, make wise choices about what we can affect, and move forward into the uncultivated terrain of the next moment."

So swim in the ocean. Wander the woods. Paddle at the water's edge. Make the change that's pressing on your mind and your life. Give your heart to new love, or to a longtime love that needs a new commitment. Raise your voice for justice. Side with love in the struggle that is ahead, the struggle that is already here.

Life is calling us to courage. There's no promise of safety, but there is the promise of whole-hearted living. What greater promise could there be?