

A Time for Renewal
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Every summer, for most of my adult life, I've made a pilgrimage to Baxter State Park in northern Maine, a place designated "forever wild". I am drawn to the wilderness, to the woods and streams and mountains – especially Katahdin, the highest peak, which occupies a central place in my spiritual landscape.

This summer, again, I made that trip. But for the first time, I did it with a sense of foreboding. I procrastinated getting ready, and it took me a while to understand why.

Over the months leading up to Baxter, I had lived under the limits imposed by the Coronavirus – all the measures we take to avoid getting it or spreading it. I had limited where I would go, what I would eat who I would see. I interacted with the world in large part through my computer. My walks in the woods, my chosen spiritual practice, tended to be local and very short.

I had gotten used to living in a narrow place. I had adjusted to the limits, and part of me was afraid of what it would be like when I stepped outside of them.

When I came to Baxter, the transition was not immediate. My body was not prepared to climb Katahdin, because I had stayed away from the big mountains all summer long. But there were smaller peaks in Baxter that I could climb, and many splendors to be witnessed. At first, my senses were dull. But gradually I lifted my eyes to the hills (as a Psalmist wrote). I shucked off the limits of Covid-19 for a while. After eight days out, I realized that Katahdin had worked its magic on me again. I'd gotten Baxter back into my body.

It was hard to leave home for Baxter, and it was even harder to leave Baxter for home. Certainly I looked forward to reuniting with my family. But the closer I got to home, the more resistance I felt, and it had to do with living under the limits of Covid-19. Again, the transition was not easy.

But life was not the same again. After living without the limits for a few days, I now saw them as provisional, as temporary. I had imbibed beauty, the way a

thirsty horse drinks water. I had lifted my eyes to the hills, and that wider view had become my new horizon.

Today we gather in a virtual space. These past six months, the congregation has lived under the limits of the Coronavirus. An in-person gathering, which was scheduled for September 6, didn't happen. Sometimes it's hard to imagine what's on the other side of these restrictions. And they are just the tip of the iceberg.

In the larger human community so many lives have been upended, so many jobs lost. So many people have died, so many more have suffered and still suffer. The full human cost of this pandemic has yet to be reckoned.

In the Hebrew Bible, the book of Exodus describes a people living under extreme limits. The Children of Israel lived for generations in the land of Egypt, a place they called Mitzrayim – meaning literally, the narrow place. Conditions grew increasingly harsh, until they were living as slaves. Through Moses, God called his people out of their condition of slavery and toward a Promised Land. But they were not yet ready to take that big step into their future. Many wanted to turn back or keep things as they were. They had to go through a time in the wilderness, a time of uncertainty and unclear boundaries, before they were ready.

I'd like to suggest that we are being called out from Covid-19. In this time of transition, we are being called out of that narrow place even as we continue to live with the restrictions and the protocols. In these uncertain times we will be called not merely to adjust but to adapt, to find new ways of being together. We are challenged to stay with the feelings of un-ease and frustration, and ponder questions like these: What brings you joy, in the current situation? What do you value about the church that's here, right now? What do you value about it that's missing? What's missing that you no longer need?

A tree stands against the storm. The branches that fall represent accumulated habits and lore that no longer serve a useful purpose. Some branches fall, but the tree as a whole stands firmly as it bends, but does not break.

We are experiencing a special case of what is always the case: the church needs to be actively held together by persons and processes that constitute a vital core. It's a body that renews itself continually: responding to adversity, taking in the crap, breaking it down, and finding new ways to use it.

What is the body for us? In Seventh-Principle terms, we are a piece of the interdependent web, made manifest in the ways we worship, in the ways we show up, in the ways we bear witness.

What is the nourishment that keeps this body going? Caring for one another. Ideas old and new. Beauty. Connections to the larger world. And a vision of what that world can be.

We could simply adjust to being in a narrow place, but that takes its toll. The children of Israel were used to living under Pharaoh, but it sapped the vitality of generations. When they rose up to walk through the wilderness, many were ambivalent. But what they had to live into was their liberation. How did they live into that? It was an ongoing process of learning, of renewal, as they felt the radically different contours of new choices to be made.

This faith community has its immediate concerns, including the temporary limits imposed by the Coronavirus. The worst thing we could do is to internalize these limits, to let the fear of contagion set the tone for our lives. If we look at the limits with a quiet eye, we may see that each one represents an open door.

It connects us with bonds of empathy and solidarity to all those who suffer from the disease itself, or from fear and isolation; to all those most vulnerable including the oldest and the youngest, the poor and the sick and the homeless. It connects us with bonds of resilience and hope to all those who heal, who educate, who work against the spread of the disease or strive to find a cure.

It reminds us that we are part of a larger body. We move with the currents of communities of resistance including our own Unitarian Universalist Association, which call us to rise up and out of a narrow place.

That narrow place includes racism.

As members of society we have adjusted to it (and thus participated in it) for so many generations that we just don't see it. We have gotten used to living under Pharaoh and supporting Pharaoh's rules. We adjust. It takes a toll on us and others: on bodies; on lives; on communities; on planet Earth.

We are being called up and out. In the words of Susan Frederick-Gray, "there is no going back to normal".