

# SHARING OUR STRENGTH

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## CALL TO WORSHIP

Susan Landis Steward

This is a season of reflection in a time of turmoil and anxiety. I just spent two weeks on my own mini-sabbatical, doing nothing work-related, and, as I do every year, I spent the time looking back on last year and looking ahead to the next. I like to read other folks' reflections and, in doing so, I came upon this quote by Archbishop Desmond Tutu:

"Ubuntu is about the essence of being human, it is part of the gift that Africa will give the world. It embraces hospitality, caring about others, being able to go the extra mile for the sake of others. We believe that a person is a person through another person, that my humanity is caught up, bound up, inextricably, with yours. When I dehumanize you, I inexorably dehumanize myself. The solitary human being is a contradiction in terms and therefore you seek to work for the common good because your humanity comes into its own in belonging".

This resonated strongly because I've been thinking a great deal about community and how important it is to be in relationship in these hard times. Maybe it's my age, but I'm finding that I need to depend more on the kindness of others in so many ways. I also find that I am called upon more and more to respond to the needs of others. My humanity does indeed come into its own in belonging, and I am learning that I am, indeed, a person because of my relationships. So, for me, I plan to work on letting go of my sense that my identity is rooted in my fierce and proud individuality, and committing to a year of exploring and living into the meaning of ubuntu. Perhaps you would like to share this journey with me.

Come let us worship together.

## READINGS

From "A Great Time to be Alive," Dr. Martin Luther King's 1964 Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech.

...I have the personal faith that mankind will somehow rise up to the occasion and give new directions to an age drifting rapidly to its doom. In spite of the tensions and uncertainties of this period something profoundly meaningful is taking place. Old systems of exploitation and oppression are passing away, and out of the womb of a frail world new systems of justice and equality are being born. Doors of opportunity are gradually being opened to those at the bottom of society. The shirtless and barefoot people of the land are developing a new sense of "some-bodiness" and carving a tunnel of hope through the dark mountain of despair. "The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light." Here and there an individual or group dares to love, and rises to the majestic heights of moral maturity. So in a real sense this is a great time to be alive.

Therefore, I am not yet discouraged about the future. Granted that the easygoing optimism of yesterday is impossible. Granted that those who pioneer in the struggle for peace and freedom will still face uncomfortable jail terms, painful threats of death; they will still be battered by the storms of persecution, leading them to the nagging feeling that they can no longer bear such a heavy burden, and the temptation of wanting to retreat to a more quiet and serene life. Granted that we face a world crisis which leaves us standing so often amid the surging murmur of life's restless sea. But every crisis has both its dangers and its opportunities. It can spell either salvation or doom. In a dark confused world the kingdom of God may yet reign in the hearts of men.

From Rainer Maria Rilke.

All will come again into its strength:  
the fields undivided, the waters undammed,  
the trees towering and the walls built low.  
And in the valleys, people as strong  
and varied as the land.

And no churches where God  
is imprisoned and lamented  
like a trapped and wounded animal.  
The houses welcoming all who knock  
and a sense of boundless offering  
in all relations, and in you and me.

No yearning for an afterlife, no looking beyond,  
no belittling of death,  
but only longing for what belongs to us  
and serving earth, lest we remain unused.

## SERMON

Sometime before the holidays I received a slim volume in the mail called *National Law Sunday – Forces unite amid stupendous crisis, a Shocking Glimpse Behind the Scenes*. It was about the Rapture and how to identify the Two-Horned Beast and the signs of impending disaster. I tried to read it a little hoping to understand more about the appeal of this apocalyptic vision. Yet from the title onward – *National Law Sunday??* – I could find no narrative thread or logical approach in it. I could make no sense of it. What are people thinking who are convinced of such ideas?

We can well laugh at those who predict the end of the world on a particular date, which then passes leaving some charismatic leader scrambling and believers shaken. Yet we do well not to mock or simply dismiss these believers. Apocalyptic thinking is seductive. It's been around since forever.

And, here's the rub, many of us have our own version of the apocalypse. It goes something like this: economic and environmental crises loom on the horizon, threatening to do away with life as we know it. Indeed, global warming and economic collapse figured in the book that I got at last year. They were the among the plagues visited upon the wicked and evidence of a global crisis foretelling the arrival of the End Times.

We think of ourselves as so much more enlightened, and truly I think we are. Yet we do have our own doomsayers proclaiming the end is near. Our purveyors of apocalypse – and by ours I mean the ones we listen to – warn us that the world as we know it is coming to an end. Our economic system is on the verge of a total collapse that will lead to world-wide civil unrest. We've already reached peak oil production, we're on the downside of history. We are living on and in borrowed time. We are consuming at an alarming rate and borrowing from the future to do it. We will use up and fry the planet at almost the same time. Our lives are about to change abruptly. People will starve and die and it will all be horrible. If we don't mend our ways, the Day of Judgment will be upon us.

Indeed this is a different kind of Judgment Day than the predicted Rapture, but just as frightening an apocalyptic vision.

This kind of apocalyptic talk drives me crazy. I think there is a good deal of truth in it, but ultimately I don't think the feelings of fear and helplessness it inspires in me are especially useful. And it can be just as preachy and terrifying as anyone talking of the Rapture. People try to scare us into mending our ways, and I don't think that's the best way.

For here's the thing about apocalypses. I doubt they ever actually happen over night. The Rapture book I received predicted that it would come at midnight, although it wisely didn't give a date, I found myself wondering, which midnight in which time zone? That's the trouble with predictions of impending doom, when they fail to come to pass, too many of us can dismiss them and return to our bad old ways.

Some predict that the End is Near, yet others, wonder if the apocalypse has already come – the horrors of the 20<sup>th</sup> century culminated on Sept. 11, 2001. What if we are already living in post-apocalyptic times? This is more intriguing to me. For we

may well be in the midst of a true apocalypse. Our way of living is not sustainable, and I suspect that we are in one of those paradigm-shifting, watershed moments when human history turns in a new way.

Apocalyptic thinking has been around forever. There is something in the human psyche that is attracted to it. I'll bet there has never been a historical period when people have said, "Wow. This is a great time to be alive because everything is going just right." We reserve that for nostalgia. Golden Ages are only golden in retrospect. It's rare that we catch them glimmering in the moment.

Yet here's another problem. If this is "The Apocalypse" it's been going on for a good hundred years and may likely continue for another hundred.

The direst predictions of global warming warn that sea levels will rise dramatically in the next ten to twenty years. And it could happen, but most scientists working on global warming say it's more likely to happen on a time scale of 50 to 100 years. They just do not know. There are so many variables at play, it's impossible to say for sure. Which gives the climate-change deniers all sorts of fodder.

And an apocalypse is never as clear as predicted. Markets rebound somewhat and muddle along into a wobbly recovery. We'll never return to the golden days of the 50s or the 90s or what I now hear called the Naughty Aughts, but neither will we descend into global chaos. The earth will continue to get warmer, but in the notoriously unpredictable ways that climates change.

Historians a century from now may be able to see an actual turning point. We are far less likely to see it. A Blade Runner world from dystopian science fiction is unlikely to come to pass. And certainly whatever comes to pass is going to take decades, if not centuries.

So what do we do?

My first question is what if this is "a great time to be alive?" Dr. King was able to call his day such even in the face of what he called "an age drifting rapidly to its doom." He said "I have the personal faith that mankind will somehow rise up to the occasion.... In spite of the tensions and uncertainties of this period something profoundly meaningful is taking place."

King had his own version of apocalyptic times, but he called them "a great time to be alive." Are we, too, so lucky to be alive at a time when meaningful change is possible?

We have an opportunity to change. We can see far enough ahead to know that change is necessary. We are not sure what it will look like. Times are still uncertain. But we have an opportunity.

Dr. King was "not yet discouraged about the future." He knew "the easygoing optimism of yesterday is impossible." That the pioneers "in the struggle for peace and freedom" would still face great hardship that could well lead them "to the nagging feeling that they can no longer bear such a heavy burden, and the temptation of wanting to retreat to a more quiet and serene life."

But he also saw that "every crisis has both its dangers and its opportunities. It can spell either salvation or doom. In a dark confused world the kingdom of God may yet reign in the hearts of men."

What better time to be alive?

For even if the apocalypse isn't imminent, or even if we're smack in the middle of it, this is a time when we can see more clearly than ever how very much we need one another. The economic crisis has torn away the façade of our independence.

We will all have to live within our means and depend on one another to do it. We will have to live as if we are connected to each other and to the earth.

We will have to change the way we live. We will have to change now without having a clear idea of what it will look like. Without having a clear path before us of how to get from where we are now and where we need to be.

Writer Barbara Kingsolver's deepest concern is the environmental crisis. She speaks of the repentance we need to show to heal our relationship with the earth. She wonders, "How is it possible to inspire an appropriately repentant stance toward a planet that is really, really upset?... However much we despise the monstrous serial killer called global warming, it's hard to bring changes. We cherish our fossil-fuel driven conveniences, such as the computer I am using to write these words. We can exactly name-call this problem or vote it away. The cure involves reaching down into ourselves and pulling out a new kind of person"

So, how do we become that new kind of person?

I was talking to someone recently who just had a conversation with a group of friends who all can see the writing on the wall and were wondering what it will take for us to make the necessary changes. They feared that nothing short of a crisis, that apocalyptic vision of disaster will make us change our ways. They wondered if only a crisis would bring about the kind of collective effort necessary for us to make the changes we need to make.

Then they got to wondering what it is about crisis that can bring out the best in humans. We do rise to the occasion. In crisis we put aside our differences recognize our common humanity. Help each other out. Face to face with disaster, we are somehow able to live the way we know we are supposed to. We find the capacity to reach deep within ourselves. We help one another in a way that feels powerful and good and right.

I think this is why the apocalyptic voices on all sides cry out that the end is near. They think it is the only way to truly motivate us. And perhaps they are right. But this tactic always backfires as soon as the crisis fails to materialize as predicted or precisely on time. I think this is what truly terrifies many of us. We fear that the motivating crisis will come too late.

Will it take a crisis? Is our sense of crisis looming large enough now to motivate us? I hope so. For even if the direst predictions don't happen for a hundred years, I don't wish such a life on anyone.

We can begin now. We can recognize that we need each other. We can start living differently, now, together. We can take responsibility for our lives and our actions. We can educate ourselves and work together.

Later this month, we will have two adult classes that will look at what we can do differently. I will be leading a class on living in the new economy. How we can support one another in living in a world with fewer means. Living more simply yes, but also finding ways to support and care for one another. Bev Koch will be leading a class from the Northwest Earth Institute called Menu for the Future about how we eat and what it means for the earth.

In both classes, we'll be able to sit down and talk together, work together, be together, figure out some things together.

None of us know what the world will be like in ten, twenty, fifty years. How bad will it be? How will we have adapted and changed for good or ill?

We cannot know. All we can do now is take the responsibility for educating ourselves. Taking responsibility for ourselves. Finding out what's really happening in our economic system, in our food production, and then living by what we know. Being open-minded and willing to change.

And here's the most hopeful thing. The truth is that what we need to do is work to be well ourselves. Eat well, spend and save wisely. Live wisely. Simply be well yourself. In it's deepest sense this is not selfish at all. It doesn't mean excluding

others, it actually means being more open to others. It means living as if the South African concept of Ubuntu is the deepest reality. Knowing that “a person is a person [only] through another person, that my humanity is caught up, bound up, inextricably, with yours. When I dehumanize you, I inexorably dehumanize myself. The solitary human being is a contradiction in terms and therefore you seek to work for the common good because your humanity comes into its own in belonging”.

When we are living well we are living this truth, this reality most firmly. Crises remind us of this truth most dramatically. Can you live this way outside an in-your-face crisis? Our answer to that question is critical.

I don't know what it will look like. I don't know how it will happen. But I do know that it is possible when “an individual or group dares to love, and rises to the majestic heights of moral maturity.”

I do know that together it is possible to come into our strength. I don't know if we can achieve the vision of the kingdom of heaven that Dr. King saw or that Rilke saw when.

The houses welcoming all who knock  
and a sense of boundless offering  
in all relations, and in you and me.

No yearning for an afterlife, no looking beyond,  
no belittling of death,  
but only longing for what belongs to us  
and serving earth, lest we remain unused.

In the Rapture version of the Apocalypse, all the signs of impending doom are there, but all one need do is repent now and believe purely and the reward will come. Our version of the apocalypse is more challenging. We do not wait for redemption in the future; we must work for it in this life. Our salvation or doom is in our hands.

So, let us dare to love and rise together “to the majestic heights of moral maturity.”  
Let us reach down into ourselves and pull out a new kind of person.  
And let us do it all together, knowing that “a solitary person is a contradiction in terms.

Amen. May it be so.