

What's Your Story?

We are in a really bad time. I don't say this to depress you, but because it truthfully describes our situation worldwide and here at FUSW. Collectively, we are helpless to do much about the savage invasion of Ukraine by Russia. Individually, we are in a dark time of social isolation, great health anxiety, and terrible loneliness. General anxiety and polarized animosity have hugely increased. Between 2016 and 2020, half of political Independents in the U.S. settled on a political party (Landon Schnabel, Cornell University). Since 2019, the percentage of Americans who described their mental health as "excellent" declined 21% (Gallup Poll). Ninety percent of psychotherapists say their clientele has increased since the start of the pandemic, and 20% of psychotherapists say they have been forced by personal issues to decrease their hours. (New York Times). Again, I don't say this to depress you, but to simply say that I recognize we are in a very bad time. We are ALL in a bad time, just better or worse for some compared to others.

We have been here before. This is an old story. We not only survived but learned about getting through tough times to a place of peace. My clinical specialty for thirty years has been anxiety, because I realized that, starting about 1990, the vast majority of people coming to see me were primarily anxious and secondarily depressed. After 9/11--in addition to the Columbine massacre and the Oklahoma City bombing of that era—people became more chronically anxious. People felt and acted anxiously, and this communicates strongly to others, like ripples in a pond from a thrown stone. We are emotionally in a similar place of flux. Millions of people now quitting their jobs is not coincidental but caused by pandemic rage, hope and a desire to make their lives better. Half of theology schools in the U.S. report an increased enrollment. (Association of Theological Schools, Pittsburgh) Over the last several years, I noticed greatly increased numbers of workshops offered to psychotherapists and clergy on stress reduction, compassion fatigue, anxiety, and burn-out. We live in a cloud of anxiety and stagnation so pervasive that it comprises a new normal. I hope a commitment to making things better is energizing many people.

I am not here talking about the extreme but relatively rare reactions: Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Of course, following a traumatic loss or traumatic event, most people are significantly upset and/or distressed and those most directly affected are most symptomatic. In the arc of progression for Hero stories, the Hero sets out to conquer obstacles—kill the dragon, climb the highest mountain—and during that quest for a resolution the Hero is tested and refined by setbacks. The Hero is changed, and that change makes the Hero—and, by extension, us—better. We are all heroes in this story of facing the insidious damage of the multiple obstacles of the pandemic and flood and invasion, which is different than a single, definable trauma.

Temporary, adverse reactions to a single trauma are often less extreme and more tolerable. Most people are resilient. They—or we—can absorb the event into a values framework whereby it is problem to learn from. We examine what our lives are essentially about, and find meaning from a new perspective. Most people describe some positive outcome from catastrophic events. For example, sixteen months after 9/11 a colleague asked me if I had seen, as he had, an unusual number of people suddenly deciding on a changed life course, say from advertising executive to social worker or mail carrier to itinerant adventurer. We both thought so, and he said it had been remarked on by clinicians in the Oklahoma City area; it was as if a number of people seriously considered making big changes after they assessed the impact of that trauma on their lives.

Anxiety has so permeated our society that we hardly notice it. Let's say you cook something very fragrant in your kitchen, "but after a few minutes the aroma subsides. The aerosolized particles that make up the scent haven't gone anywhere; the receptors in our noses have just stopped responding to them. Most human cells are able to downregulate their response to overwhelming stimuli, which explains both why you stop smelling the same thing after a while and why your brain can get way too used to being overly stressed. That's what happens with chronic anxiety.

This process should not be confused with resilience... your existing neuroreceptors begin to downregulate their response to ever-present stress chemicals. But, paradoxically, your neurons develop more and more stress receptors, which makes you more sensitive to stress. . . . If certain people can't build resilience, perhaps it's because their bodies go into fight-or-flight mode too readily, because their neurons have too many stress-chemical receptors . . . and therefore are easily triggered to [strong] emotional reactions. And even if a city [or a society] is of a radically different nature from a human body, it's still a complex system that can be challenged past its breaking point by persistent stressors." analogous (Mario Alejandro Ariza, "Come Heat and High Water," THE BEST AMERICAN ESSAYS, ed. Rebecca Solnit, page 33) This is what happens when people are forced into vastly reduced social connections.

In terms of being insulated from isolation, I got very lucky. I know that I have been negatively affected by social isolation due to sadness from repeated grief, anxiety about the latest doom-release news, and anger at feeling helplessly trapped. But, mostly by accident, my house has buzzed--sometimes literally vibrated--with social activity. Besides my wife, I lived with four late-adolescents and a one-year-old--it was a lot of activity and noise. None of us is completely immune to anxiety, but other people can be the antidote. A researcher reported after the 9/11 era that 90% of those directly affected by 9/11 said they had gathered help from talking with friends and family, and 80% gained comfort from religion. Only 30% said they had

sought any organized mental health resources. Why were friends, family, and religion seen as vastly preferable and effective in dealing with traumatic loss?

An interview (New York Times, 2-18-2022) with Laurie Santos, a Yale professor of happiness, can start us on the road to understanding the benefits of community. She said: “There’s evidence that cultural structures, religious structures, even smaller groups like your CrossFit team can cause true behavior change. . . .There’s a lot of evidence that religious people are happier in a sense of life satisfaction and positive emotion in the moment. [for example] is it the Christian who really believes in Jesus and reads the Bible? Or is it the Christian who goes to church, goes to the spaghetti suppers, donates to charity, participates in the volunteer stuff? . . . if you can get yourself to do it—to meditate, to volunteer, to engage with social connection—you will be happier.”

Gathering with people who are loving means that the identity they support for us is an identity of loving and being loved. Other people can act as social mirrors, enhancing our love and openness. As the Board and I said in our statement opposing the Ukraine invasion human rights, freedom, and democracy build a better life for everyone. Therefore, the foundation for truth and trust that love gives us enables us to recover from trauma. The repeated experience of loving others, having that trust reciprocated and affirmed, and coming to commitments together extends trust and truth to others. It furthers calmness in the midst of strife. It changes the story of our lives.

I will give you two examples:

First, four years ago “Pulse—voices from the heart of medicine” (you know, that online magazine published by Diane and Paul) had an article (Dan Yashinsky, “Riding Out the Storm,” Pulse, 2-2-2018) by the storyteller-in-residence at a research and teaching hospital for the elderly in Toronto, Canada. He co-leads story-telling circles for people who have been stunned and stymied by intractable depression, which “means creating a time and space where stories can be told, heard, imagined, and remembered. The patients often tell me they’ve lost the thread of their own life stories . . .storycare helps them to reclaim their sense of wonder and suspense—and, surprisingly, laughter—even in the midst of their suffering.” Yashinsky created the ceremony I used at the outset of this service, to convey that this is a haven for us all, a place to recover what has been lost.

And, second, there’s George, who came to my clergy support group for several years. George was minister to a small Protestant church where he and his wife were expected to attend a weekly Friday night gathering of three centrally important, highly affluent couples from the congregation. George was conscientious in pastoral care and devoted to ministry, but this gathering to discuss “current events” was burdened by alcohol and superficiality. Further,

this group passively blocked his efforts to expand congregational membership. George shared his concerns with the clergy group, which—collectively—had over 300 years of experience in ministry. The group listened as George recounted how boring it was, how he felt trapped and wasted, and responded with empathy and concern as his weight increased, his wife angrily stopped going to the Friday gathering, and his depression increased. It became apparent this congregation was stuck. Finally, I said to him, “You’re in hell, a velvet-lined hell. It looks like a race to see if you first leave this congregation or the ministry.” I looked around the group and asked what they thought. Some strongly, others quietly, concurred. George started looking for other congregations and had his pick of three.

We need to call each other, meet with each other, and enjoy connections that affirm our values and rebuild our world. We have been isolated, but we are all in this together, tasked with rebuilding a life together. We will be tempted by the mental lollipops of social media and computer games. It is normal to look for relief and escape from struggle. Relating our stories is not without risk of hurt or rejection. Listening empathetically is not without risk of feeling anxious turmoil. However, our grief is often soothed through stories about losses and our friendships with others. Our shared humanity is affirmed as we feel the pain of others and they respond to ours with concern.

We need to tell each other our stories of pandemic hurts and our mourning for the building—in our own time and when we feel ready. Incidentally, in the April 5, 1976 newsletter, the then-minister Bob Smudski wrote: “we have done a lot of talking about floods, yet have actually done nothing to protect ourselves from another flood. IT IS IMPORTANT THAT WE GET BACK ON THE TRACK WITH PLANS AND ACTION ABOUT FLOODS.” An old story, indeed. We have lost the memorials for our treasured family and friends, the garden, the trees, and the place where previous ministers gave us their best thoughts and dreams. It will take years to recover from chronic stressors and a major loss suffered coincidentally. We have suffered from the masks that hide most of our emotional expression and the flatness of Zoom screenings. But we will also share what it has meant to persevere through pandemic lockdowns. We will share how the values we have given each other, the values we have shared and exemplified, fortified our spirits and encouraged us to positively encounter each other. We don’t have the building, we don’t have that sacred ground, but we have the sacred sharing we do with each other.

You are here because you know that it is the experience of being included that heals. Now, I am going to ask you to ramp it up. At whatever level you participate—do more. Yes, I know the conventional advice, that we are a small congregation and we are tired already from doing too much, but you have been constricted from doing enough interaction until now and it is time to do more. It is time to re-write this story. Be a hero. It is time to call people, to give to others your gift of presence, and receive from them their reciprocal concern. Does this sound

like a lot? Of course, it does, because your neuroreceptors have been overwhelmed and physiologically you feel exhausted. I'm betting you are not exhausted, you just feel depressed. You will feel refreshed with MORE, not less, interaction. Attend your program group meetings and participate. Respond to this sermon, agreeing or disagreeing, and tell us how. We will soon have a Stone Soup pot luck gathering planned for the South Church Fellowship Hall—be there. You, specifically, are our community and our community is you all together. Get more involved!