

NAME

Melting ground Audio.mp3

DATE

October 28, 2021

DURATION

30m 11s

2 SPEAKERS

Speaker1

Speaker2

START OF TRANSCRIPT

[00:00:00] Speaker1

The following is a message from Wellsprings Congregation.

[00:00:06] Speaker2

That was so beautiful. Sometimes I just want there to be music. And then we just sit and enjoy it. But I'm here to tell you a story or two when I was, oh, about 10 years old, I had a near near almost drowning experience. I was born and raised in southeastern Kentucky in a really rural counties, and as I've been driving around Chester and Montgomery counties in the past few days, honestly, this reminds me so much of home where I'm from is even more rural than this, and in fact, most of the county roads. Do you call them hollers here or is that just an Appalachian thing, Appalachian thing anyway? All of our holler roads were, for the most part, gravel or just dirt. Well, actually into the early 2000s. And while I'm sure for the grownups, that was a real pain, but as a kid, that didn't bother me at all because my reality was that I had long summer days of running barefoot in the grass, in the grass of getting to tromp through woods, climb trees and on really hot days to go swimming in a cold pond. This is actually a picture of not a pond that I swim in, but a pond that I visited in Jellico, Tennessee, throughout my childhood. My childhood was filled with those green rolling hills, and the next photo is a beautiful photo of the Cumberland Falls, which was very near to where we lived.

[00:01:51] Speaker2

In many ways, my childhood was kind of idyllic. And so while again, those unpaved roads made life hard and winter in the summer, they made it a joy. And so on this particular hot summer day, there were probably about two dozen of us kids, ranging from probably seven up to 16 or 17 that got to go without grown up supervision, tromping down a road to the pond near my friend Michelle's house. And I remember this, particularly because the pond by our house was really small, but this particular pond was quite big and why we loved it. It's because on one end was a high bank where the particularly bold and brave swimmers could actually dive into the deep end. But the other thing that made it fantastic was on the other end, the shallows actually went out really far. So for the more timid, less sure swimmers, you could actually wade out to your knees, your belly, your chin for seven eight nine 10 feet before you hit deep water. I was in that second group of less sure swimmers, so all all the big kids were out practicing their dives and their back strokes. Quite a few of us were on the shallow end, helping each other to doggy paddle and the float. We were taking turns with that, and it was my turn to help my friend Michelle. So I stood the water laughing at my chin, my hand gently on her back while she took deep breaths and we would laugh and I would step away.

[00:03:32] Speaker2

We were doing that for a while when we heard these loud shouts coming from the middle of the pond, and I turned just in time to see two of the big kids racing from the bank to the water at a breakneck speed and without even pausing. They cannonball into the middle of the water. Shouts and laughter and splashes happened, and I took a step to get a closer look and what I thought was solid ground melted under me and to just sand and water and my head went under. And I panicked. And began to splash my feet, paddling furiously under me, trying to find that solid ground I thought was there. My head came up and I guess for air before I could say anything, I went under again in the panic set in. Even more in my arms are going wildly and my feet are splashing and I can hear the laughter from the middle of the pond. But I can't tell in my disorientation, Am I going towards it or am I going towards the shore? And I come up for air again, and as I'm gasping, I felt a hand shove hard against my shoulder and my body went stumbling and I felt another hand grabbed my arm and yank. And my flailing feet finally hit that ground I had been hoping for, and my sister, who had a hold of my arm, continued to pull and we stumbled into shallower water.

[00:04:57] Speaker2

I fell to my knees, gasping and coughing up pond water while she pounded me on the back. And then all the other kids who had witnessed this near almost disaster, which, to be honest, took all of maybe 15 seconds began to tell the story. Did you see her face? Did you see her head go under? Oh my gosh, it's a good thing. April and Michelle were there and we told the story and made it bigger and began to laugh. And when the big kids came to shore, they teased me for forgetting my dog paddle and congratulated my saviors. And we all agreed in the way that children do that. We should maybe not tell the Grown-Ups this story lest they decide we're not allowed to go swimming unsupervised again. And so while we laughed and shared the story with each other. And in the way of children continued to play. I still remembered that feeling that terror of the water washing over me without warning. And I remember that feeling for a very long time. And I've been thinking about that moment and that feeling for quite a few years now, certainly for the past, I don't know, 20 months or so, because if there is a better metaphor for what has happened during this pandemic, then the ground underneath us melting without warning and the water rushing over our heads.

[00:06:23] Speaker2

I can't think of it. And so. Last January, in 2020, as we all made our New Year's resolutions and started to make our plans for the year not knowing what would come. We were like me splashing in the water. No worries. And then in February, as rumors and whispers about the pandemic began to spread as information and misinformation rolled in on us. And then as hospitals began to fill up and death tolls rise and then the lockdowns came and all of our plans just dissolved like nothing. I remember I remember the feeling of disorientation, and maybe you do, too of weddings being postponed. Of milestone celebrations like high school and college graduations having to be marked by only a congratulatory card. Birthday parties turning into car parades. Did you have those in this area? One of my friends actually said to everyone in the entirety of 2020, whenever their birthday rolled around, you get a do over. Not so, she said, happy birthday, but here we are 20 months later, maybe all of us still wishing for a do over. Still, having plans get formed and dissolved and formed and dissolved, and we wish, don't we, just for two, two weeks, two weeks universe. Of anything we plan being able to stay solid underneath us. And yet things keep dissolving the precarity of life. Has been made so clear during this pandemic, but the surprise for some of us, I think, is that that precarity is itself a surprise.

[00:08:27] Speaker2

Because as we long for normal, what we perhaps forget is as in the words of Sonia Renee Taylor, which should be our next slide, do you know Sonia Renee? She's an activist and a poet. And she said these beautiful words in the summer of 2020, which somebody in Cleveland actually put on a wall normal never was normal, was not working for too many of us, normal for so many people, even before the pandemic was worrying. Will I have enough money to pay my bills this month? Normal was worrying for the food in my pantry, last for my kids this week. Normal was wondering Where will I sleep tonight? That was normal for so many of us. Not that life was suddenly precarious, but that life always is and always was. It's just that many of us were able to pretend that it wasn't. But even for those of us, and I'm hoping not as most of us here who had all of our basic needs met before and during the pandemic, the fact is. Life was still always precarious. We know that grief can come knocking at any moment. We know death is actually the only sure thing we have in this life. How many of us have had the ground knocked out from under us? By the accident. The late stage cancer diagnosis.

[00:10:07] Speaker2

The heart that stops beating has happened to my sister's neighbor just two weeks ago, mowing the lawn on a sunny day. And even if it isn't death, that takes our plans and scatters them, even if it isn't death, they're still there, still so much uncertainty. A baby that arrives two months early. The layoff from the job and happy things like going along on your own and then suddenly falling in love, that will knock your plans out too. Yeah. But as we move through life and face its precariousness, it is a normal human reaction in the best of times and certainly in these not so best of times that we want to cling to something sure. And so we have this human response to life's precarity that often moves us into denial and we do something like this. No, no, no, I can't handle it. I can't handle that. Everything I want could be taken from me at any moment. I can't handle the water rushing over me. And so. So perhaps one of the ways that we answer that is to shut down. We numb ourselves, we risk little and love even less. We say since nothing really matters, then I will do nothing and we just coast along in life. Making no plans, doing nothing that matters. We forget, as the song said. That we could fly. And so we just walk. We could swim, but we cling to the shore.

[00:11:56] Speaker2

That's that's one way we respond to precariousness. Another way which I have seen, and I'm guessing you have seen so much during this pandemic is that we look at the precariousness of life and say, No, no, no, you are wrong. It is not water under my feet, there is solid ground, and I know there is solid ground because I believe there is solid ground and I believe there is solid ground because my leaders told me so my religion tells me so. My God tells me so. And we cling to that because to do otherwise is to admit that any moment we could drown. There's a story I heard once it's actually a joke, although I don't think it's a very funny joke, but I'm going to tell it to you anyway, and it goes like this. There is a person who decides they want to build a house by the Mississippi River. It's been a lifelong dream. And so they find some land and they and they scope it out. And they know that actually, while this is on the banks of the Mississippi, it's been generations since it's flooded here and they feel safe and they build their house and they live there happily for several years. No problem. But then one spring, it starts to rain. And the water rises and the rain keeps coming and the water keeps rising and the rain keeps coming in, the water keeps rising until finally.

[00:13:26] Speaker2

Evacuation orders are issued in all the neighbors pack up their cars with their with their belongings and their kids and their cats and their dogs when they start to leave. And as they pass this house, built so lovingly on the banks of the Mississippi, they see this person with their cars still parked, nothing but sitting on their porch, watching the rain, and they say, Get in your car, come on, we're going to safety. And the person says, No, no, no, I'm staying here because God's going to save me. And the people drive on and the rain keeps coming and the waters keep rising, and then the first floor of their house gets flooded and they have to move to the second floor and they're hanging out the window watching the rain. And then a boat comes by and the boat says, get in the water, get in our boat, we're going to take you to safety and they say, no, God's going to save me and the boat pleads, but they have to keep going and the rain keeps coming and the waters keep rising and the person has to move on to their roof. And as they move on to the roof, a helicopter comes by and says, thank heavens, we found you. Here's a rope come to safety and the person says, No, I'm staying here. God's going to save me. And the helicopter goes off and the waters keep rising and the person drowns.

[00:14:46] Speaker2

And when they go to heaven, they say, God, I believed in you, why didn't you save me? And God says my child, I tried. I sent the people in the car and the boat and the helicopter. And you said no and turn them away. Not a funny joke, but it's a good story, a good story about how when we are so sure of our answers, so sure of the ground that we are standing on. We not only miss the people reaching out to us in need, we miss the fact that we are in need at all. And there are theological roots to that belief, that belief that I am right. And some of those theological roots are found in our Hebrew scriptures. We are. Not a Christian nation, but a nation influenced by the theology of the ancient Israelites. I am this semester in my graduate program studying Hebrew scriptures, because I should say that while I am here serving as your intern, that is part of my studies and divinity school. So I'm a full time student studying theology and history and scriptures and pastoral studies. And blessedly, I love this program getting to apply that here with you. This mask is driving me crazy. All. Oh, the time of COVID. So I was excited to take Hebrew scriptures because I actually was raised in Pentecostal and Baptist churches and the Bible was one of the first books I was ever given as a child.

[00:16:24] Speaker2

And while it has been many years, decades, even since I believed in the Bible is the literal word of God. I was excited to get to interpret these scriptures anew. And why in a Unitarian Universalist seminary might I study Hebrew scriptures? It is because we are expected to know the sources that have inspired us as a faith, but also that influence us as a culture. And as I've studied Hebrew scriptures in the context and in a little bit of the language in which they were written, what has become really, really clear to me is that the ancient Israelites belief that God has a plan. And has everything in control and that we as people. Are living under that God with both promise and retribution. That is really, really clear how deeply woven that thread of belief is in our culture, even for people here who maybe also don't believe in God, the belief that there is a plan and a purpose is so much a part of who we are as people. The belief also that if something bad happens to you, there has to be a reason for it. There has to be a purpose and a plan. And here's the weird, weird, paradoxical piece of that. Not that God had a plan for it, but that if you are suffering. It must mean that you're being punished by God and God will only punish you if you deserve it, so therefore I can distance myself from that.

[00:18:00] Speaker2

I can say, Oh, I'm going to do what's right, I'm going to live on this solid ground and God is going to protect me. And I know God is protecting me because nothing bad has happened to me yet. It's a theology and a way of believing. That denies life's precarity and simultaneously enshrines the individual as the most holy. And that that that belief in individuality as something that is sacred as something that is real is also part of our American culture. It's embedded in our constitution and in the ways in which we have upheld capitalism and white supremacy culture, which takes body hierarchies and says some people matter and some don't, and you better be in the people that matter. But that denies not just the reality of life's precariousness. It denies the fact that there is no such thing as an individual. There is no I without we. Because relation normality is elemental to the human condition. We cannot know each other, except by knowing our relationships. If you wanted to get to know me, you would need to know where I'm from. Maybe see a picture of where I grew up. Have me tell you as that Reverend Lee and I did in an early conversation that we have grandfathers that were coal miners. My family, my society, my culture shapes the individual that I am, and I am only known to the relationships that I have so that if I want to get to know you, you are not going to talk about yourself without also telling me your grandpa's favorite recipe where you went to school, what your favorite band is, what grade your kids are in and the name of your pets.

[00:20:00] Speaker2

It is in relationship that we create, meaning it is in relationship that we exist at all. And a theology that denies that, that denies life's precariousness, that denies our interdependence on each other is that theology that says stand alone in the water and pretend it's not there. And that, to me, is life limiting. And I want a theology that is life sustaining. And it is part of why I became a Unitarian Universalist and part of perhaps why some of you became Unitarian Universalists. Because ours is a process theology. And that means it is not a theology of dogma ensure answers, but a theology of becoming of recognizing that the divine is unfolding within and among and through us all the time. It is a theology that says life is precarious and we are connected. On a certain level, we might be able to say as Unitarian Universalists that we are more open to life's malleability, more adaptable. To the shifting sand under our feet. But unless we get too self-congratulatory as Unitarian Universalist, we also have to remember that we are two humans.

[00:21:28] Speaker2

And even within our own denomination, I have seen folks cling to some short answer. Which is ironic, of course, because embedded within our principles is the fact that we do not believe in short answers. In fact, most of us would be really distrustful of anyone who says, I have the answer for you. Our principal say that we actually come together to support each other in spiritual growth. Our fourth principle says that we do that by freely and responsibly searching for truth and meaning. The search is what matters. Not that we're necessarily going to get to a settled answer, but that we can search. And yet, because we are humans and because we are Americans with that love of individual freedom, even among us as Unitarian Universalists, I have heard people say that that fourth principle is the most important principle we have, and it is the most important because of that word free. I am free to believe what I want and do what I want. And while I'm certainly not going to tell anyone what they should believe, I will perhaps point out that they missed the point by clinging to just free because the other part of that principle is we are free and responsible. And responsible implies relationship responsible implies that we are in this together. Responsible implies that we are perhaps going to get it wrong sometimes. But that we can covenant because this is what we do, we covenant to come together to say, let's help each other grow.

[00:23:17] Speaker2

There was a story I read an essay really in the you.You World magazine a few years ago that really talked about this responsible interconnectedness, and the union minister who wrote it talked about the metaphor you know, of when you're on a plane and the oxygen mask falls and put the oxygen mask on yourself first before you put it on the person next to you. You're familiar with this. I think anyone who's been on a plane, but that metaphor is sometimes used to talk about self-care like, Oh, you need to take care of yourself. And the minister said, Well, that was a useful metaphor. She really found that it was missing some key elements for those of us in community and particularly in caring professions, because that metaphor implies there is some external force that is going to tell you you need oxygen now. And the fact is, we go through our lives often not knowing that. And so she said a metaphor she had started using for herself was rather the image of divers, scuba divers wearing oxygen tanks. Yes, that you have to know how much air is in that tank. You have to gauge your own body's responses for that day. Know how strong of a swimmer you are so that you understand how deep you can go or not. And that critically, you are never doing that alone.

[00:24:36] Speaker2

You have a dive partner you're going with and you look at each other's tanks. You have someone up on the surface also monitoring you so that if my arrogance low, but I am disoriented and don't know it, you can help me. The person up above can pull us and say it's time for you to come up. Now that we are not alone in our searching, we are responsible not just for ourselves, but for the care of each other. I love that metaphor. And I saved that essay, and I actually returned to it when the pandemic rolled out and shared it with my colleagues that I was working with at the time of how we have to help each other, that life's precariousness and our interdependence means that we need to agree in covenant to come together and say yes. Yes, we are in this water together, and we can help each other to swim. When we think we are alone too much and I am not talking about the solitude that we sometimes go to, that helps renew us, but alone in our suffering alone and our despair. It is too easy to think that the universe is indeed laughing at us to think, as Reverend Ken called it a few weeks ago that the capriciousness of the universe is at our expense. But really, if we accept life's precarity, if we accept our interconnectedness and then trust that covenant is big enough to hold us, covenant is the container that says you are safe here.

[00:26:14] Speaker2

Covenant is the big kids way out in the middle of the pond, swimming and diving, and not afraid, not because they have the safety of a solid bottom under them, but because they have each other. They've helped each other swim. They help each other float. They look out for each other and when they need, they say it's time to go to shore and rest. That is what Covenant helps us to do. It helps us to be the big kid swimming. Covenant holds us. It lets us experience the fullness of freedom together. It helps us take breaths. When the waters are seen over us and the ground is melting, it does not promise us that we will always get it right. Covenant does not promise us. That there will be no pain. Covenant promises that we will be held in community. And that is wholly. I cannot think of anything more wholly and miraculously ordinary than people holding each other in times of joy and suffering. Last week in Reverend Lee's sermon, she talked about the power of naming our experiences, and I think how wholly and miraculous it is that my sister and friends were there to pull me to shore that day of my near almost drowning. How holy it is that during this time of pandemic, we have found new ways to covenant and come together as a community that we can gather here today knowing that maybe we won't next week.

[00:28:05] Speaker2

But that we will still be a community, we will still support each other, we will still be able to say, take my hand and come into this boat. The Indigo Girls or one of my favorite bands, and we heard a song by them earlier, but they have another one called Deliverance. I think must be an answer to that story, because it says. We're looking for deliverance, but it's already been sent. And it's been sent in you and me together. And that is the promise that I take from Covenant. That life is precarious, but we have each other and we are each other's deliverance. We are in the words of Marge Piercy. We are each other's miracle. Maybe so. Were you enter into prayer with me? Dear spirit of life. Breath that moves through us and connects us all. We are grateful to be here, both in body and in spirit together as a wellsprings community. We come today with hearts, both heavy and light, with joys and sorrows. We accept that the ground underneath us is never solid. But we know spirit. That as we come together as a community, we are held in love. And in strength to get us through all the hours and the days to come. Hold us in love. And lift our hearts for just this moment. On the. If you enjoyed

[00:30:00] Speaker1

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