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START OF TRANSCRIPT

**[00:00:00] Speaker1**

The following is a message from Wellsprings Congregation. All right. Show of hands for the few people here in the room with us and show of yeses in the chat. For those of you joining us from home, how many of you know about the zebras on the loose in Maryland? Oh, I see a couple in the back. And Theresa knows about them. Yes, this is real. At the end of August, OK? It is currently, what, mid-October? A month and a half ago. Some zebras got loose in Upper Marlboro, Maryland. Not an area that's that different geographically than here in Chester County. So like not your standard zebra territory. A few dense towns, some suburban areas in that area and a surrounding expanse of rural farms, which turns out included one farm where the owner had a permit to keep 39 zebras. Yeah, apparently just for fun on his property. And there's actually some debate over whether it was three or five zebras that got loose. So like two to four of them are still missing as of this very moment in suburban Maryland. They interviewed a zoologist The Washington Post did after the zebras escaped, who said that they'll probably actually do just fine until we find them. There's no lions, as far as we know in the greater Upper Marlboro area, so there's no natural predators to threaten them. They're just out there drinking from streams, grazing on fields and lawns in the area.

**[00:01:47] Speaker1**

Yeah. So that means that Maryland residents suburban D.C., just outside of the capitol, have been on the lookout for almost two months now for zebras and a zebra kind of stands out in the suburbs. So there have been lots of sightings, many of which people are capturing on their smartphones and uploading to social media. I think my favorite of those has to be this one. He's actually the dad of these three kids in the picture. Josh Dubois, the former White House director of faith based partnerships of All People. He and his wife decided to kill a Saturday by dressing up their three little kids there to go zebra hunting. Sadly, he said, no dice. But then the next day on Sunday, Josh's six year old Auguste was out with his dad in the car and as they were coming home that night from the backseat, he said, Auguste said calmly. That I saw the zebras. So Josh pulls a U-turn in this neighborhood, he said, I pulled into some random guy's driveway and bam, there they were wild Maryland zebras. He took a video and hopefully it'll work so that you can watch the video of the zebras yourself. Go ahead. So this is literally the zebras in Upper Marlboro right here. Oh my God. Oh my God. You heard him saying the same thing that I think I heard Julie say, Oh my God.

**[00:03:31] Speaker1**

Right? So why am I telling you about wild Maryland zebras this morning? Except that it's awesome? Well, Josh Dubois said it himself in his last tweet that day. He gave a shout out to his wife for having that idea to go zebra hunting in the first place and for planting the seed creating good zebra vibes. He said the seed that had his little boy watching. Expectantly. You see, they had named that there was something now possible. For their kids to look for that their kids had never thought was possible before. That there could be zebras, not only when they went to the zoo or looked in a book, but literally anywhere that they were looking around their hometown. And because that had been named, their children knew to look. Our message series this fall. Garrett Wellsprings has been all about how we cope with chaos and constant change and unpredictability. Things like packs of wild zebras running loose in the suburbs. And other kinds of things. And today, in my last message in this series, I want to talk about how just calling things by name can help guide us through chaos and through uncertainty. Especially when the chaos seems overwhelming and so much appears to be out of our control. It can be a real relief sometimes to remember that we have a simple starting point that's possible. Just to call things by name. To speak the truth of what is happening.

**[00:05:29] Speaker1**

And to name what we are looking for, to name our hopes. I have a friend I went to college with. We played on the rugby team together. Her name is Lulu Miller. And if you are a big NPR person, you might actually recognize that name. She is one of the hosts of the Invisibilia podcast. She has one of the coolest jobs I think of any of my friends from college. Lulu has been an NPR producer and an on air host, and now she is a writer. Also, she has a recently published Award-Winning book called Why Fish Don't Exist. And that title will come back in the story, because it's ironic that she recently published a shorter essay that I'm going to tell you about now, a story about her infant son's 11th word, which was Guess anybody, fish? Very good. More like, sheesh, she admits. But it came out of his mouth one night as her son was in the bath, clearly pointing at a picture of a magenta fish on the wall. Lulu said he already had words like dog and ball and mama and actually dada, which she said is odd in our lesbian household, but whatever. And half a dozen other words. But because of this project, she had been writing, this word obviously landed differently for her. You see, Lulu says in my book, I argue that the word fish is symptomatic of our inability to see the world expansively.

**[00:07:20] Speaker1**

Fish is considered to be this common knowledge category of organisms. But in reality, it's an outdated classification. It doesn't have much scientific meaning. Lulu says scientists over time have discovered, of course, that there's much more diversity within fish than there is outside the category. And many of the creatures that we typically think of as fish are in fact more closely related to us than to each other genetically. The category of fish, she says, is sort of an act of gerrymandering that we perform over nature so that it keeps lining up with our intuition, with what we think we know. But it's a group that hides incredible nuance and complexity. Her son didn't know any of this, and he continued learning language the way that we all do. Making even bigger classification errors in his mind as he started to expand that pathway of what was possible for him to name. She said any animal that walked on all fours to him was a dog, any bird was a duck. And now everything else that was scaly or slimy or found in the water was a fish. At first, she said even an ant crawling on the sidewalk was a dog. But then she watched as he learned more ants became bugs, not dogs. And then finally, ants became ants. A few weeks after Lulu's son named his first fish, the whole family went on a visit to Lulu's wife's parents, her in-laws.

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And they put their son to bed in the guest room, but around 10 o'clock that night, he woke up screaming. Not crying, Lulu said, screaming. It was a sound they had never heard. First, Lulu's wife went up, but she could hear that the screaming was still happening, so Lulu followed her upstairs. They were worried he was sick, but he had no fever. Lulu tried to settle him by rocking him. They offered him warm milk. It was all useless. Until finally, Lulu said her wife took him over to a framed photograph on the wall of ancient Coptic tapestries. Just something in her parents house. Various trees on this tapestry were birthing goat like creatures with curling horns and snail like creatures with spiraling shells. And maybe snakes and vines all coiling into one another in such a hallucinatory way, Lulu said that it would have caused me to have a psychotic break if I'd been as disoriented as my son. It looked like chaos. But Lulu said, my wife got him up really close to the glass. And started whispering in his ear the names of what she saw. Goat, she said. Tapping the glass. Flower. Snail. Duck. And one by one, as he started hearing these simple words that he knew. Connected to the images, he could see the voice of his mother. Naming things in the chaos around him.

**[00:11:25] Speaker1**

Slowly, he began to breathe. And calm down. Her little boy who had been so scared by who knows what. Found some safety again. Just by recognizing and naming. What he could. Any of you who live with or love someone with an anxiety disorder might recognize the same strategy. It's something that people often use for calming in the midst of a panic attack. Five four three two one. Name five things that you can see. Four things you can touch. Three things that you can hear. Two things you can smell and one thing you can taste. Calling things by name helps us find a way through the uncertainty. And yes, it calms us internally so that we can act from a more grounded and true place. But calling things out by name also builds a bridge. It helps others see what we are seeing. There's plenty of chaos around us right now, right? Take your pick of current events. And maybe for you, there's chaos closer to home. Maybe forget current events, right, maybe you have a loss in your life or a diagnosis, a change in your relationships, a shift at work. I think some of the worst damage that we can do to ourselves and each other is pushing ahead through all that without stopping to name it. Naming our challenges does not have to pull us down into it. But it can settle us down.

**[00:13:36] Speaker1**

And when we name these things together. We can actually be pulled back out. By each other. I mean, just think about a time that you have been afraid or worried and you named what you saw and just having someone hear you and say, yes, I see it too, right? I see the goats and the fishes and the snakes. I see the fragmentation around us. I see the fear, the growing inequality. The violence, the selfishness. The isolation. I see it, too. Calling it by name. Creates a shared starting point for moving forward. It's the spot from which we can build that new path out of the chaos. That first step helps us ground ourselves in covenant together. With promises that we can make to each other, rooted in the values we share in the common things that we see about what kind of community we are hoping for. Our community here at wellsprings of shared faith is a covenant all community. We covenant as Unitarian Universalists. To affirm and promote the principles of our tradition. And we covenant here as well, Springers, with our DNA, those unique values and commitments of our own local community as well. That's our common ground. That's our third party in our covenant together. The thing that's out there where we can place our mutual trust, even in the moments when we're not so sure about each other. That happens. But that common ground that we covenant with pulls us back, even if any of us pull away for a time.

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Or even if we can't be together in the same way for a time. With so much isolation and distance and fragmentation all around us, being willing to commit to ongoing presence with one another. Grounded in our sacred values is no small thing. And it is a great place from which to start building a path out of the chaos. I love this graphic that I came across from a family therapist in Florida. You'll see it up here in a second from a family therapist in Florida named Whitney Goodman, because it just reminds us of this simple fact that the way we heal is never just one way or another. All about ourselves and our internal work, or all about the outward people who come in and help us. It's about both working together, self and relational healing, all at the same time. We name what's happening for us, and we hear what we call out reflected back by another person, especially when that other person is willing to join us. And create that shared path forward. And that's why I also see one of our congregational goals for this year as being so important right now. To build and strengthen more partnerships in our community outside of our doors. Community relationships are not one way. They're not just about us here doing something for people out there.

**[00:17:35] Speaker1**

They are two way relationships that heal us where we are broken as well. Because they bind us up in new covenants, they stretch us to see new people as related to us as our neighbors. And when we create those new covenants with new people, we have a chance to name what matters most. To us and to the folks outside of our doors. And become an even stronger base. For growing something moving forward. We build these kinds of covenants in parts so that we will have someone to hold us when we are scared and point out to us what we know to be true. To remind us of the things that we can see and hear. And trust. That's a sort of covenant in and of itself. I'll close with a story that shows us just how simple this can be on a day when maybe you are enjoying the beautiful fall weather and trying not to think about complex things for once, I agree with Chris that this is the best season. It's boot season. I'm very happy. So lest you think this has to be hard. I want to share a story that is out there on the internet, this is definitely internet law. But according to the interwebs, a teacher did an experiment once. To show her classroom full of children, the importance of knowing and calling each other by name of working together to get where they all want to go.

**[00:19:26] Speaker1**

It said that she filled a hallway with balloons. Hundreds and hundreds of balloons. And somewhere in that hallway, her class of maybe 15 or 20 students. She wrote each of their names on one of the balloons in that giant pile. So first, she told the class they would have 30 seconds to hunt through all of those balloons and try to find the one with their own name on it. And she said, Go. And it was chaos, right? It was a mess. Balloons were flying everywhere, but with so many balloons to look through, not a single child found their own balloon in 30 seconds. So she said, stop, stop, stop, and she gave them a new challenge. She said start picking up the balloons that are closest to you and when you find one with a name. Hand it to the person whose name is written on it. Within a minute, everybody had their own balloon. Imagine all those schoolchildren plowing through that hallway full of balloons, it is chaotic whether they are looking for their own name or someone else's. But when they work together. And when they know that they can help each other and call each other out by name. The chaos does not have the final say. Now there's a pathway out. May there be a pathway emerging for all of you this morning? Amen. And may you live in blessing.

**[00:21:11] Speaker1**

I invite you to join me now from wherever you are, perhaps let your eyes fall closed. Perhaps let your shoulders drop if you notice that they are high up. And join me in the spirit of prayer. God of our hearts, own language. Whatever chaotic spaces we might see around us. Or feel inside us. May we remember this morning? That it is not nothing. In fact, it is perhaps the first and most important step. To simply speak them out loud. So name. The things that we can identify within the uncertainty and the chaos. To break it down into parts. To remember that just noticing our experience of what is happening can settle us. And help us connect to others. Who will help us find that way out? When we strengthen these covenants between ourselves and each other with the people we trust. We find new sources of strength. And so may we remember that those connections and relationships are a place to recharge? To start. And to grow from. I mean, we feel those connections this morning or at least know where to start looking to find them. These prayers I've spoken and for the prayers that all of you, wherever you are, are holding on your hearts this morning. We say amen. If you enjoy this message and would like to support the mission of Wellsprings. Go to our web site [WellspringsUU.org](http://WellspringsUU.org) That's wellsprings the letters UU dot ORG

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