

Falling Apart As a Spiritual Exercise

Bellingham Unitarian Fellowship
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Happy New Year! Yes I think we can still be in that mode today: on this cusp of time looking forward and looking backward—and also looking inward. Today we consider Falling apart as a spiritual exercise, which may sound a little threatening. But taken step by step, in a safe environment: letting yourself fall, and then calmly setting yourself back up...this can be a healing process.

GATHERING SONG *Where my Free Spirit Onward Leads* #324

CHILDREN'S FOCUS "Children of the Sun"

from Erdoes, *American Indian Myths and Legends*, p.119

Summary: Far back in time the Osage lived in the sky, wondering where they had come from. They wandered to the Sun, who told them that they were his children. They wandered to the moon who told them she was their mother...and that they must now go to live on the earth. They looked down to see the earth was covered with water. There was no place for them to live. They asked Elk (for the animals were also wandering with them)...Elk, who was fine and stately, to help them. Elk jumped into the water and thrashed around perilously. Then he called to the winds for help and they blew aside the water so that Elk would not drown. At first there was only rocks and mud. But Elk was so happy to have survived that he rolled all over in joy. As he did all the hairs from his body were pulled off into the mud. And each one sprouted into something green: corn, beans, turnips, grasses, trees.

REFLECTIONS: Preparing the Support Harness

Have you ever felt like you had fallen and were drowning in an unknown sea? Have you ever thrashed around fiercely...felt like pulling your hair out? Can you imagine doing all of that voluntarily, as Elk did? Fortunately, Elk could call upon the winds for assistance, seeming to know that help would be there. What sort of safety net would you need in order to take such a leap?

Can you imagine that all the hairs you've pulled out over the years could sprout into new, life-giving greens?

Elk was not pushed into the waters. But we can imagine that if he had *not* chosen to fall, that eventually, he, and all the human and animal people with him, would have fallen—perhaps from exhaustion... since they could not return to their home in the sky.

The people turned to Elk, who inspired confidence because he was fine and stately. And Elk said, yes, I am fine and stately. It is right that I should plunge into the unknown, and, cry out for help, thrash around, and pull out all of my hair. What an interesting model of honor and courage!

It's nice that we have powerful creation stories such as this in our diverse cultures. It's nice that we have a culture in which it understood to be normal, even heroic, when we plunge into the unknown, and, crying out for help, thrash around and pull out our hair.

We choose our own stories. We could choose a story in which the Elk people, proud of their fine and stately character, tended to stand up straight, look with fierce eyes into the cold wind, never stopping to rest, never voicing their fear that they have no idea where to go.

We choose our stories. So we could choose a story in which the Elk people encounter difficulty, project their insecurities upon one another... and then, instead of falling, they push down someone else.

The Osage chose a different story. A story in which it is understood that falling is not the same as powerlessness. Falling is not the same as losing control. Falling is not weakness or failure or passivity. Rather, These Elk people recognize that falling, while frightening, can be the new beginning of actively changing our lives.

What did Elk and his people have going for them in this apparently bleak situation? They called upon the winds for help. Now was that just dumb luck that the winds were willing to help? I think it's a reasonable assumption that the Elk already have a relationship with the winds, that the Elk know the winds' names, know their great powers...and know the limits of the winds' powers....

In addition to the power of the natural spirit of the wind, Elk also has the people for support. Elk might feel that he's out front, but the presence of his community means a great deal. He is not alone. His efforts will light the way for others, and they have mutual trust and confidence, even if the outcome is unsure.

Still, Elk needs guts because, despite all the support and preparation for the plunge, it's just not possible to prepare a nice soft landing spot. It's just not possible to prepare a map of the road down. It's certainly not possible to prepare the way, because the way has not been traveled.

I now invite *you* to take courage, in the form of a responsive affirmation. The one-sentence life-stories that Jeff and I are about to speak reflect voices among us. Who *are we* who would plunge into the unknown? Who *are we* who would, with nothing but an interdependent web of existence to catch us, abandon decorum, and voluntarily release ourselves to the void?

Please stand, and say in response: ***“I stand in fearful joy...life and death swirl before me.”***

- ✦ Watching the pain experienced by a loved one, I wonder if life can ever be the same again...
“I stand in fearful joy...life and death swirl before me.”
- ✦ I am caring for my aging parents, my children, and my grandchildren, all at once. Surely there is something that sustains me, but when will I ever have time to learn its name? **I stand...**
- ✦ With so many changes at work, I have to wonder whether I'll be able to maintain my health insurance... **I stand...**
- ✦ I miss my friend. Life will be different now. **I stand...**
- ✦ There's some real trouble at home. I don't see an end in sight... **I stand...**
- ✦ I've been looking for a place where I can be myself. Does such a place exist? **I stand...**

- ✦ After all these years in the business, I have to ask whether this work has any meaning for me... **I stand...**
- ✦ I'm noticing the effects of age. I knew this day would come, but I can't say that I'm ready for it. **I stand...**
- ✦ I'm not always in control of my emotions... **I stand...**
- ✦ I don't know how to explain to my kids, or my co-workers, the way I've been feeling recently. **I stand...**

HYMN

Voice Still and Small

#391

GUIDED MEDITATION: Falling

This work of the inner spirit is very personal,

but it is not necessarily done in isolation... we can do it side by side, present to the mystery of one another's deepest selves ...

present to the mystery of one another's deepest selves...while the inevitable terror of their lives, and our own, occurs...

Standing in fearful joy while life and death swirl before us.

What lies ahead? What IS this *fall*?

Is it screaming, writhing, cursing, giving up, releasing, submitting, letting go, saying yes, saying no, is it

insight, acceptance, loving reality, catharsis...? abandoning well-laid plans? Abandoning the expectations of others? What IS the fall?

Is it soothing for some? Wrenching for others? Or must it be wrenching, AND somehow freeing... strands of loss and possibility woven fine...?

What do I fear, here on the precipice?

How will I be perceived? How will I be evaluated?

How can I release my grip? If I'm not in control no one will be. I am the one who is ultimately responsible for my life, and I have a lot of impact on others too...

Besides...I'm SO close to getting it ALL together... then there will be nothing that can go wrong...as long as everyone follows MY plan...

But creation comes out of chaos...

Even what has been created needs to return to chaos...

to be recreated in a more vital form...

I don't want this dream to die

Remember that death is natural...

And death is not the final word...

I'm going to do it. I'm going to do it for myself, and for everyone whose life I touch.

Do it then, let yourself go...

[Silence 3:00, chime]

REFLECTIONS

There is no predicting the nature of the fall, but it's unlikely that the view from the place we have fallen will be a pretty one. Not at first anyway.

When I lived in Cleveland I volunteered at a men's shelter downtown, run by the Salvation Army. At first that experience felt like a brisk slap in the face but before long, it became quite life-affirming to work with these men whose lives had fallen apart, with pieces scattered all around and behind them. Most of the men were alcohol and/or drug abusers trying to break into a new way of life. They began by acknowledging that much of their falling apart had been their own responsibility.

I worked with them on the 12 step program. The fourth step of this program is to take a personal inventory of our resentments, and the behaviors that have arisen out of these resentments, behaviors that have caused pain to ourselves and to others.

It is a difficult, painful process. Taking personal inventory. Taking stock of ourselves. But it may be a little easier to do when we've been shaken up. And when we've safely landed. Again I'm talking about Elk, and I'm talking about the *voluntary* falling that we've been gently stepping through today.

If we have fallen well, can we better identify the pieces? Pieces of ourselves and pieces of the world around us? What's there and how much of it? What do we have enough of, for now? What do we have too little? What do we have too much?

Inside your order of service [printed below] is a personal inventory page. I will not be asking anyone to share anything today. This is your private landing strip and assessment tool. It's pretty word-heavy so feel free to draw and doodle make connections visually on it as well. We're going to have about a 5 minute interlude now so I invite you to reflect honestly and courageously.

INTERLUDE

CONCLUSION: Picking Up the Pieces

What can we do about the things we want to change in our lives? What meditations, resolutions, classes, or personal conversations could move YOU toward your goals?

Do you have a friend with whom you could share your spiritual/ethical goals...someone with whom you could talk and periodically report on the progress...would you like to share your goals with me? I would be happy to meet with you individually. Or if you just want a casual conversation about how things are going, there's Lunch with Paul every Tuesday at noon.

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Today we've had the opportunity to imagine ourselves a part of a wandering band of animal people, looking for a place to call home. We were called upon to fashion ourselves as the Elk, and to plunge into the void of our fears.

This is a role that we can enact over and over again voluntarily. Preferably BEFORE a fall comes involuntarily.

And the story can be enacted not only from the perspective of Elk. Don't forget the supporting role of the people: The people who let Elk know that they are willing and able to be a safety harness. That too is a way we can relive and relearn the story.

This coming week I encourage you to live out the story again. Pick the role you DON'T usually play. Elk if you haven't fallen apart for a long time. Or play the people (if you tend to play the Elk a lot). Play the people: say to someone, and say it explicitly: that you will stay with them through their plunge; that you will love, respect, and trust them, through a time of risk and awkwardness ... that you will cook, watch their children, drive them somewhere, whatever is necessary. And then later, let's listen to one another's reports of our adventures.

SOCIAL and ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE COLLECTION

– for Lydia Place, fighting homelessness

SENDING SONG

Come Sing a Song with Me #346

BENEDICTION

*May I have the Courage to change the things I can,
Serenity to accept the things I cannot change,
And the Wisdom to know the difference.
May I have patience with things that take time,
Appreciation for all that I have,
Tolerance for those with different struggles,
And the Strength to get up and try again,
one day at a time.*

Personal Inventory

This year I'd like to be more...

forgiving	kind	happy
honest	assertive	hopeful
sensitive	generous	peaceful
patient	playful	energetic
trusting	grateful	warm
engaged	calm	joyful
confident	friendly	tolerant
good-humored	satisfied	secure

consistent in living what I profess to believe
expressive with my feelings
connected to my inner-self
connected to the earth
connected to God
connected to my family
connected to my co-workers
connected to my congregation
connected to my neighbors/local community

I'd like to be less...

judgmental	annoying	petty
irritable	angry	afraid
anxious	apathetic	defensive
guilty	lonely	confused
gloomy	self-destructive	isolated
cynical	envious	resentful

Other areas for growth

diet
exercise
healthy or unhealthy habits
interpersonal engagement
spiritual practices
reading/writing

What, specifically, am I doing that I would like to change? (What do I avoid? When do I get angry? etc.)

✦
✦
✦

Small and large things that I can do to move toward my spiritual and personal goals:

✦
✦
✦

With whom could I share my goals?