

Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of the Rappahannock  
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## Falling Apart

In his observation about the Christmas story that you see quoted in the order of service this morning, my colleague Richard Boyce speaks about how fragile the story is. There are so many ways that it can go wrong, and yet it never stops happening. The first spoken words of the Christmas story, as you have heard me say before, are “Do not be afraid”, and it’s a good thing that reminder, that directive, comes early on. There are quite a few things to be afraid of in the story if you’re the least bit faint hearted, but getting a solid grip on that “do not be afraid” part gets you through the most difficult places in the rest of the story.

One of the great advantages of working at a graduate school is that we get a two-week vacation at Christmas. In the middle of the week before my Christmas vacation began, I left the neighborhood diner one morning after breakfast and decided I had time to go to the post office to mail my daughter’s Christmas presents before work. I remember that decision, and then there’s a big, merciful gap in my memory. The next thing I remember is lots of confusion, which I presume was in the emergency room where I was taken after a car crashed into my car. I had a lot of organization, a lot of preparation, a lot of efficient scheduling in place to make my Christmas plans smooth and make my transition into vacation delightful. Then, in a matter of seconds, everything fell apart.

Here's what I discovered, slowly and painfully, after everything fell apart: Christmas came anyway. It wasn't the Christmas I wanted or hoped for, but that didn't seem to matter to the rest of the world. I had a vacation still, not at all delightful but a vacation nonetheless, which meant I didn't get behind at work while I recovered from a concussion. The world, as Mary Oliver says, did not turn as it was taught—did not turn as I thought it should have turned, at any rate. And there was nothing I could do about it. While I was in the hospital, I kept thinking about details, some small, some quite significant: I don't have a car. I'm supposed to be at work. I still have to get my daughter's Christmas presents in the mail. Where's my jacket? My dog has to go outside, my cats have to be fed. Every time I would ask a question or mention a need, somebody would say, "Don't worry about that right now." In many ways, that reassurance was a relief, but the part of my brain that was still alert knew that those chickens would eventually come home to roost, and all the time that I was not worrying about those things, they still needed to be managed, organized, solved...*somebody* needed to worry about them.

My memory of that time in the hospital is muddled, but I do know that somebody told me that my brother in law had picked up my dog and fed my cats. My niece had contacted the insurance company and put that process into motion. My sister had called my colleague at work, who had in fact been trying to reach me, since I had not showed up that morning and she hadn't heard from me. There's still time to get the presents mailed, my sister said. Getting a car will come later, somebody else said. Nothing, absolutely nothing, during those days in the hospital, was in my control, and I who am accustomed to being the only one who manages anything

that has to do with me found that I was completely at a loss. I did not know how to get along; I did not know what to do when everything had fallen apart.

This is what I learned during that turbulent time of thrashing around in troubled waters: when I couldn't manage my life, others rose to manage it for me. Many were strangers, who mostly gave directions and asked questions, some bizarre, some profoundly kind and caring. Are you cold? Would you like a warm blanket? How many words can you tell me that begin with the letter "f"? Is there anything you feel like eating? Who is the president? Do you know where you are? Of course, others who participated in my wellbeing were family and friends. My sisters, brothers in law, and my niece took over the parts of my life that could not be put on hold until I was better. They tended to the things that I was directed not to worry about-- cared for my animals, let my children know what had happened, arranged for me to talk to my children once they knew I had time, space, and thinking skills for quiet conversations. They made plans about me without my participation, which is a deeply unsettling and surprisingly comforting at the same time.

I appreciate Richard Boyce's perspective as he holds up the fragility of the Christmas story for us to consider. Where he says things were always *about* to fall apart, I would have said things *did* fall apart. In Richard's view, though, something else always seemed to happen to redeem the nearly hopeless circumstances that had to be adjusted, shifted, adapted. Things did not turn out the way they were expected to, time after time. But they did turn out, and maybe the way they were expected to

wasn't the only way. I who thrive on knowing what will happen next, knowing what to expect, knowing that everything is in place the way it is "supposed" to be, do not flourish in the midst of confusion and upset and absence of plans. I who believe wholeheartedly that the Universe knows what it's doing find that I can believe that most easily when I know what I am doing. So one of the questions I asked myself often this past Christmas was, what can I learn from this experience? What gifts does it have to offer? What keeps me faithful when things fall apart?

The short answer, and the most comprehensive answer, is friends. Community. Being held in the light by some people who are part of your daily life and others who are peripheral to your everyday activities, but who express deep concern when they know you are in trouble. My memory of my time in the hospital is not clear, but I do remember my first visitor that was not a member of my family. He came with my sister on the first day; he is the minister at her church. Years ago, when my children were small and I was participating in the United Methodist church, this man was an associate minister at the church we attended, so he knows me in that context, but we aren't in touch and I have not seen him in years. Still, I recognized him immediately, and I was deeply touched that he had come. I'm sure that he saw that visit as part of his ministry to my sister as well as to me, part of his job, in fact. Yet I expect that he does not realize that seeing his face appear around the partition let me know early on that I was surrounded by steadfast, Universal love—not just the love of my family members.

Other friends visited and got in touch after I left the hospital and went home with my sister and brother in law. People from work, people who knew me through my sister, and of course, you. I wasn't clear about how you knew I had been in the hospital, but I saw in my email a UUFR newsletter announcement about my injury, and after that a flood of email from you. Your concern and care and love and encouragement had healing power beyond what you can imagine, and I cherish every one of your prayers, good thoughts, and expressions of care.

Something happened when I was being discharged that also kept me faithful after things had fallen apart. It was evening, so it was getting dark, and I was continuing in the experience of not knowing where I was or what was going to happen next. My niece was going to take me to my sister's; beyond that, the whole process was mysterious and out of my hands. My memory is not clear about the discharge area, but my impression is that there were people stacked up like stove wood in a glassed in area next to cars that were swarming around outside like the bump cars at the fair. I was in a wheelchair next to a woman, also in a wheelchair, whose arm was in a sling, and who had a dramatic black eye. I remember thinking at least I was better off than she was.

"This is so confusing," she said; "it's really frustrating. My dad is picking me up, and he's doing his best, but he doesn't know what to do."

"I know," I answered, "I don't know how anybody can figure this out." I don't remember what I said to her exactly, or what sort of unspoken vibe passed between us, but I do remember that she took my hand and held it tightly. I squeezed her hand in response, and felt a deep, quiet calm come over me. The Universe, that knows what it's doing, knew that woman and I needed

each other. She needed my comfort, and I needed to know that I still had that to give—I could offer reassurance and brief encouragement to a stranger, and she could reach out to me seeking and finding exactly that. And we were lined up next to each other in that turmoil of a discharge area, strangers in a strange land, each being able to find in the other something that we needed. I was not the only one displaced from my routine and my reality. I was not the only one dealing with struggle and uncertainty and turmoil. Our fragile stories, always just about to fall apart, are shared stories—shared by strangers, but shared nonetheless. In that sharing with a stranger, I was able to reclaim and recognize once again my truest self, the self that I am called to be, the self that could minister to a stranger and who could at the same time receive ministry, recognizing my own vulnerability and confusion and helplessness.

Fragility and falling apart are just as much part of our stories as security and confidence and control. In the midst of our falling apart we have family, friends, each other; or in the absence of those, we have strangers---even the strangers who share our fragility. The stories that we have written for ourselves sometimes prove to be pure fiction; they don't turn out the way we've written them at all. When that's the case we feel vulnerable and damaged and helpless, and when that happens, somebody, some thing, comes and holds us up. In the Christian sacred text God promises, "I will not leave you desolate. I am coming to you." Even for those who don't believe in God, that promise, from wherever it originates, is true and real. We are not left desolate. We are held in each other's care.

And so may it be.