

# “Choosing the Upward Spiral”

## Sermon by Rev. Rebecca Bryan

June 5, 2022

We are bookended by joy today, and who among us doesn't need some joy right now? How wonderful it is to see the front lawn of our church filled with vibrant rainbow-colored Adirondack Chairs, made of recycled materials no less. What a wonderful message of welcome to passersby and proclamation of our welcoming and affirming stance to LGTBQI people! Thank you to our Meet and Greet Team and to the Welcoming Committee for this wonderful addition. Welcome PRIDE month, welcome everyone – welcome home!

This was originally to be a sermon about the ongoing costs of the pandemic. I had said yes to that topic, knowing the pandemic, which is transitioning into an endemic, is far from over. Not only have we lost over one million people in America who have died from COVID and more than six million people worldwide, we are far from understanding the long-term implications and ramifications of what it all means.

I wanted to address the issue because as your minister, I know that some among us are struggling. They are struggling to overcome bad habits acquired over the past two and a half years. Others are doing everything they can to regain or maintain their health. Still others are fearful of going out in public aware of the dangerous consequences if they get COVID, because of preexisting health conditions.

Every one of you belongs. Every one of us is part of this congregation. I love and care for all of you, and so do many other people. If we know and haven't seen you, we miss you. If things have changed and you've moved away, your seat is always here. If we don't know you well yet, we want to.

This is a church, a spiritual community of those who love one another.

What I'm about to do is bold; however, I'm going to ask you to participate in something.

If you've lost someone you loved to COVID, please stand. If you are online, put your name in the chat and one of the members in the back will stand up for you. Look around. These people lost loved ones to this virus. Now, please rise if you knew people who died from COVID, even if they

were not close to you, perhaps coworkers, neighbors, or students. More of us standing, of course.

Please rise if you've lost people you cared about over the last two years, for any reason. Please rise if you have been afraid during this pandemic and are maybe still afraid. Please rise if your heart is breaking over the conditions of this world. Look around you.

You may be seated. Suffering is universal.

The Buddha said that we will all experience 10,000 joys and 10,000 sorrows in our lifetimes. It might sound like a lot, but when you add in the small, the daily, and the seemingly insignificant joys and sorrows, I think he was being conservative.

I started by saying that this was a difficult sermon to create, and it was. I had made a promise to someone to preach about the ongoing costs, or losses, of the pandemic, socially, economically, spiritually. And when I make a promise, I mean to keep it. It takes a lot for me to go back on my word.

And yet, something happened as I went through my day last Monday, preparing in my mind and heart to write this sermon. Every time I got close to it, by which I mean began to consider approaches, words, or ways to write about this, I got flooded. Flooded, for those who are unfamiliar with this use of the word, is a term often used in trauma. It happens when our emotions overtake us, and we are unable to think clearly. Often, whether we know it or not, we are brought back to early times in our lives.

This is not shameful. It happens to all of us. I hope we can move that language beyond the trauma paradigm and recognize that we all get overwhelmed at times. We are all human, after all.

Cathartic emotional release has its place, and I am no stranger to that. I became comfortable with it and recognized its gifts many years ago. What I'm talking about is different. It's when our emotions overtake us to the point that we are unable to think clearly or be fully in the present.

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I've learned what to do when this happens. I talk to myself, particularly my younger self, the part of me that has gotten stirred up. I talk in a soothing, reassuring tone, the way I would talk to my own children or our children here at FRS or my dog. I try to understand what is really going on and what I need to do to reground myself.

I call a friend who knows me well and can listen and reflect honestly to what I say. I ground myself in nature, stretch my body, or take a brisk walk while singing. It passes. I'm restored to center, generally calmer, even if sometimes tired.

Last Monday was different. As I listened to podcasts about the pandemic while cleaning the horse paddocks, I could feel myself getting antsy, uncomfortable, irritable. I felt the seizing, the almost desperate need to *know more*. I was determined to figure out this issue, to figure out the ongoing cost of the pandemic. I know what that kind of mental takeover means too.

When I'm hell-bent on something, with a fearful or entranced hyper thinking or doing, I'm far from present. I'm reacting.

After a few more times of podcast angst, I called a friend. I told her about the sermon I had promised to write and how unprepared I felt to address this overwhelming topic. Our conversation helped, but not really. I had another conversation that afternoon with similar results. My coping mechanisms were failing.

In my third call, my daughter said something that finally caused me to calm down. In telling her about my experience of flooding around this topic, she said to me, "Mom. If you're feeling this way, your congregation is feeling this way too." That was it.

The words reverberated the way the truth does in my body. "You can change your mind, Mom," she went on to say. By Tuesday morning, I knew I needed to talk about an answer rather than the problem.

You know how broken this world is right now. You know what the endemic has done and is likely to continue to do. We know this is probably not the last pandemic or world crisis in some of our lifetimes. Consider the climate crisis. The experts told us we were at risk of a worldwide pandemic. We didn't listen. Experts are telling us things now.

We need to listen.

We need to change our ways, individually and collectively. We need to uphold the truth that our lives are interconnected and that if we make it, we'll do so together. In my opinion, we need to make way for the feminine, by which I mean a way of approaching things, not a gender. We need cooperation, mutual respect and love, sharing, kindness, site for the unseen, and systems that benefit us all. Am I dreaming? Where has what we've been doing gotten us?

But all of that doesn't keep me grounded, or at my best self. I must balance those things and the pain of this world, my own and others, with the upward spiral – joy, peace, calmness. I need joy to be the best peace advocate I can be. I need inner peace to create peace around me. I need laughter to catch my tears. I believe we all do.

Choosing the upward spiral, while remaining aware of and sensitive to what is happening around us, is not something we do naturally. It is more common to go down the negative spiral of defeatism, skepticism, and loss of connection to goodness. Connecting to the upward spiral is a choice. We have to catch it when we feel it, as it can be fleeting and easily pushed down by our habitual patterns of worry, anxiety, and, in this case, guilt for being happy. But it's there. The joy. The calm. The gratitude. It's there. When you feel it, stop and relish it. Feel it so you can recall it and let it make new pathways in your brain, your body, and your heart.

Dr. Arrielle Schwartz names some things that reinforce the upward spiral. These include stretching – moving our body, even in simple ways, makes a big difference – and spending time in nature, which doctors are now prescribing to their patients as treatment. Dr. Schwartz also talks about the role of gratitude in the upward spiral and connection, especially with people who are uplifting to us. She encourages us to allow ourselves to be inspired. Listen to and learn from people who have gone through things like those you face and have made it through. Learn what they did. Allow yourself to turn toward what feels

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good and nurtures us.<sup>1 2</sup>

As I said earlier, I take my promises seriously. It's hard for me to change course but sometimes, sometimes, it's the right thing to do. Sometimes we get to where we need to go in a different way, by a different route. This pandemic has been life-changing. Some will never be the same, some almost certainly. We have experienced collective trauma and it will take years, if not our lifetimes, to process and understand it all. We will be dealing with this for a long time.

We are called to be resilient. Reliance is something we learn, not for the fortunate few. We learn to understand and practice it, the upward spiral. Dr. Schwartz reminds us that nothing is wrong with us if we do not feel resilient. Reliance is a sign, not a diagnosis.

We are resilient when we have enough resources, within us and outside of us, to process what has happened and make some sense of it. Finding meaning and processing collective or individual trauma requires connection with others. Yet it is natural to pull away rather than connect. The downward spiral begins if we do fail to catch ourselves and choose otherwise. The church, your church, can be an important and essential part of your upward spiral.

There are ways to do this. There will be a monthly support group meeting run by the Pastoral Care Associates here at church over the summer. Its first meeting is this Thursday, June 9th at noon. Come share with others who are processing their feelings about the pandemic. Find understanding and friends. Reach out. Connect.

For me, it's about balance, my friends. We need to feel our feelings. We need to process. We need to allow ourselves to get angry, to act and work for change. We also need to turn toward the good. I encourage you to choose the upward spiral and allow yourselves to feel good. This act of allowing ourselves to feel good is what we bring to the world. It affects how others feel around us and how we do our work.

I'm a believer. Join me, as we climb up together

1 <https://drarielleschwartz.com/catch-upward-spiral-strengthen-resilience-dr-arielle-schwartz/#.YpZsiqjMLEY>

2 <https://youtu.be/ZIEEH9dAyOc>

and out together to face what is together, come what may.

Amen and blessed be.