

ARE YOU LIVING IN THE CONE OF UNCERTAINTY?

Rev. Scott W. Alexander, Preaching
Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Vero Beach
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Reading Before the Sermon

“Problems with Hurricanes” by Victor Hernández Cruz, 1949
A campesino [Latin American farm laborer] looked at the air

And told me:

With hurricanes it's not the wind
or the noise or the water.

I'll tell you he said:

it's the mangoes, avocados
Green plantains and bananas
flying into town like projectiles.

How would your family
feel if they had to tell
The generations that you
got killed by a flying
Banana.

Death by drowning has honor
If the wind picked you up
and slammed you
Against a mountain boulder
This would not carry shame
But
to suffer a mango smashing
Your skull
or a plantain hitting your
Temple at 70 miles per hour
is the ultimate disgrace.

The campesino takes off his hat—
As a sign of respect
toward the fury of the wind
And says:
Don't worry about the noise
Don't worry about the water
Don't worry about the wind –
If you are going out
beware of mangoes
And all such beautiful
sweet things.

From *Maraca: New and Selected Poems 1965-2000* by Victor Hernández Cruz.

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The Sermon

Three weeks ago now – as Hurricane Irma was steadily churning her nasty way toward Florida – we were (at least according to the breathless weather forecasters who were talking to us on our television sets 24-7), we were all living "The Cone of Uncertainty."

[THE TITLE AND GRAPHIC OF IRMA'S "CONE OF UNCERTAINTY" IS PROJECTED UP ON THE CHANCEL SCREENS]

Here was what that "Cone of Uncertainty" looked like about five days before Irma actually hit our fair, tropical peninsula...and yes, much to our fear and consternation, at one time it showed Vero Beach directly in the path of the powerful storm. Because the weather forecasters had placed us smack-dab in this dangerous "cone," we all heeded the warning, and began anxiously preparing our homes and our lives for a potentially destructive hurricane event.

In terms of the question I ask in my sermon title this morning...we certainly WERE all living in "The Cone of Uncertainty"...at least for a few nerve-racking days earlier this month. But, as you all know, Hurricane Irma's "Cone of Uncertainty" proved to be just that...because as the storm steadily churned its way toward Florida across the Caribbean, its predicted track kept shifting bit-by-bit in a westerly direction, increasingly threatening Key West, Naples, Ft Meyers and Tampa – even as the threat to our Atlantic coast steadily diminished.

Finally, the weather guys were able to assure us with reasonable certainty that we over here on the Eastern Coast were entirely out of the "Cone of Uncertainty," a most welcome development for us (but – on the other side -- a most unwelcome development for our friends on the West Coast who suddenly faced greatly increased danger and destruction). And indeed, the weather forecasters were right...Irma's worst impact did indeed happen in the Keys and the Gulf Coast ...and we here in Vero escaped the storm's most destructive rains and wind. Out of "The Cone of Uncertainty" we felt Irma's power, but not her full wrath!

But all this constant weatherman-talk about "The Cone of Uncertainty" – as this most recent hurricane approached – got me thinking about the broader spiritual implications of this phrase. I suppose it is an occupational hazard, but as a minister I simply can't help myself...everything, even things as mundane as weather jargon becomes grist for my sermonic mill! So the more I thought about it, the more I realized that, of course – spiritually speaking at least – we human beings (although we seldom like to think about it...and regularly do everything we can to persuade ourselves that we really are living somewhere else)...are in fact always living in "The Cone of Uncertainty." Simply put, to live as a human being on this earth is to live in "The Cone of Uncertainty," like it or not.

As I have observed many times from this pulpit, you and I live in an eternally fluid, chaotic, unpredictable, random and uncertain world. Sure our amazing physical universe operates by a set of predictable and reliable "physical laws of nature." We can (for example) count on the steady rotations of our earth and solar system to provide night and day every 24 hours...and on gravity to always hold us feet first to earth...and there are many other known natural laws and principles of physics that provide us with a more-or-less stable and predictable world.

This "good news" about the stability of our physical world does not mean that the circumstances of our individual or collective lives are always marked by certainty, predictability and calm...far from it. Although we human beings constantly strive to control as many of the uncertainties of this world as we can, we are still regularly at the mercies of this creation's openness, surprises,

and even its accidents!

Let me just give one concrete example – driving. We all understand the natural laws that determine how traffic moves, the rules of the road that society has established, and how cars, trucks and buses are designed to interact so that all will safely get to their destinations. Further, we carefully design and build our roads, traffic signals and our vehicles to maximize the driving safety for all. And yet, yet, despite our best human efforts, there are many thousands of traffic accidents, some tragically fatal, every single day across this planet. Indeed, sometimes when I am driving a long distance (and maybe this thought has occurred to you as well) sometimes when I am in my car all day, say, driving up interstate 95 from Vero to Washington to see Collins), I am amazed that – given the virtual infinite number of uncontrollable variables involved in the many thousands of drivers, vehicles, roads, obstacles and weather conditions – there aren't far more accidents than actually occur. Have any of the rest of you ever had this thought while driving...that things on the highway usually work out better and more predictably than they actually should?

As it is with driving, I think it is with almost every other aspect of our lives. We human beings do all we can to control or eliminate uncertainty and chaos in our lives, and yet uncertainty and chaos just keep happening – all routinely – regardless of how "perfect" or "imperfect" we are.

Let me give just a few examples of what I mean here about life. We scrupulously try to eat right day in and day out, and yet sometimes still develop severe abdominal problems. We avoid smoking – and yet in our 6th decade some of us are diagnosed with lung cancer. We exercise, watch our weight, get enough sleep – and yet may still develop heart disease just like our parents. We do everything we can to be an exemplar and excellent employee – and are still let go by our boss, or passed over for that big promotion. We carefully raise our children to be model citizens – and yet some of them still end up in jail, or worse.

We are all – by nature, I think – certainty-and-security-seeking creatures. As Buddhist teacher Cat Stevenson confessionally puts it, even though she spiritually knows better, she constantly devotes a great deal of her life's energy to ensuring her own security and certainty.

"This past year, I found myself becoming a security-junkie of sorts, I've purposefully designed my external life for security – the cushy job, maximizing the 401-K, additional streams of income to insulate the extra-super-comfy security, a large home for a future family, long-time childhood friends, and a solid marriage...[but as I venture further on my life's journey] I realize that [trying to anchor myself] with an abundance of security can actually become a dangerous [spiritual] habit...it can create an [unhealthy] attachment that prevents [me] from being fully awake [fully mindful to the life that is actually unfolding for me]."

And then she goes on with this truth about learning to accept, even embrace, the uncertainty that naturally comes into our lives,

"Our [life] journey will always be laced with hurt, risks, laughter, and celebration. We don't get to cherry-pick only the parts of our path we want to experience. [Life] is an all-inclusive ride. Learning to acknowledge that there will always be uncertainty will allow our experiences [in life] to be more meaningful and joyful, regardless of what we may be dealing with."

I think this observation is spot-on. Like Ms. Stevenson, we all instinctively establish security-

orientated routines and structures in our lives – and lead our lives as intentionally and carefully as we can to control or eliminate uncertainty – and yet we still eventually bump up against unwanted and unanticipated realities and circumstances – that's just the way life in this uncertain creation of ours is! Again...though we all constantly yearn for predictability in our lives and do all we can to avoid surprises, we still must in the end live in "the Cone of Uncertainty" that is life in this open and unpredictable creation.

So what is the spiritual point here? Well, simply this, I think. With life's uncertainties a given, it matters how we respond when they burst in upon the predictable patterns we have so diligently built around ourselves. I will be the first to admit that some of life's uncertainties are of such magnitude and danger that they threaten to overwhelm us – spiritually and emotionally. I think, for example, of my many friends who have (just when their lives seem to be smoothly moving along in predictable calm) suddenly receive life-threatening medical diagnosis or illness, like cancer, MS, ALS or a stroke.

Another example would be if we are suddenly disabled or badly disfigured by a serious and completely random car accident. Sometimes, when uncertainty and instability radically disrupt our lives, it is all we can do to maintain some sort of spiritual and emotional equilibrium...and no one should fault someone in such a personal crisis for being at least temporarily overwhelmed or incapacitated. But I must tell you that I believe – deep to my heart – that if we as human beings can face the unwelcome uncertainties that come our way with a measure of spiritual and emotional openness...and the resolve to live as fully and well as we can under the unforeseen circumstances...we will, in the end, find a satisfying and satisfactory way through.

Let me speak personally for just a moment. I know I don't look like it but I am in my 69th year of life. Over these almost seven decades I have been dealing with this world, I have personally (let's see how can I say this best?) I have personally had two (just only two, blessedly) two category 4 hurricanes of circumstance come ashore on my own little beach. There is no need for me to share in any detail the painful particulars of these two personal life events with you today – but trust me when I tell you that in both instances things in my life were going along very smoothly and predictably when – all of a sudden, and in a most unpleasant and disruptive way – an unexpected storm came up and swept my life into uncertainty and chaos. And in both instances, it took months, if not years, for me to spiritually and emotionally recover fully. Let me stick with the hurricane imagery for just a moment. After each of these personal "Category 4 Hurricanes of Circumstance" came ashore in my little life, I was for months out there in my own yard clearing downed limbs with a chain saw...picking up brush and branches...clearing my gutters...and piling the mess by the curbside of my existence. And in both instances, I found that "the property I inhabited" as a human being needed to change, and change substantially, if I was to once again feel at home in my life.

My guess is that most of you – maybe all of you – have similarly had at least one or two, maybe more, "Unwelcomed Hurricanes of Circumstance" unexpectedly come ashore in your lives at some point. Again, to live a life in this fluid and open creation is to sometimes find yourself dealing with situations which you never imagined nor ever would have wanted in your life...and the only way forward in the new landscape that now exists for your life is to move forward in that new landscape. When our lives are swept up into uncertainty and chaos, we must be spiritually and emotionally supple enough to adjust to the new realities we find ourselves in...and adapt to the new truth about our lives.

Here is the thing I want to spiritually suggest to you this morning. While we all naturally and strongly resist it when we find our lives swept up into "The Cone of Uncertainty," the truth is that often such churning, unsettled times turn out for us in the end much better that we ever could

have imagined in the stolid, predictable lives we so scrupulously build around ourselves.

Let me speak again personally. Though at the time I could not imagine that it would ever be so, with both my personal "Hurricanes of Circumstance" – unwelcomed and painful as they were – each of them, by forcing me out of my old secure and certain ruts and habits, enabled my life to take fresh, creative, and satisfying new turns. Although I never would have chosen these new paths with all their challenging and unexpected twists and turns, I can now see that the uncertainty into which my life was cast was, in fact, a gift of stimulation, growth and development as a person...as long as I was willing to move with the uncertainty...and live at least for a while in that fluid and unsettling place. Both times my life was cast into significant uncertainty: new doors opened for me...and new opportunities and positive challenges unfolded. I learned new skills...made new friends...inhabited interesting new environments... and discovered new pleasures and pathways for my living. I realize now that if I had gotten what I wanted – more of the certainty and predictability I had worked so hard to fortress around my life – my life now would be much poorer than it is. Do you all get this? Have uncertain and unsettling times occasionally worked this magic in your life too?

I guess what all this boils down to, dear friends, is spiritual trust. When we bump up against real uncertainty in life...when some hurricane of circumstance comes crashing ashore right where we live...and when all the predictable walls and patterns we have so carefully built around us come crashing down, it is often – not always but often – an opportunity to discover something new, something better and more adventuresome in life. But for this to happen, we must find a way to trust that life will continue to hold us.

I want to close this morning with a beautiful poem that has meant a great deal to me over the years. It is entitled "First Lesson" by poet Phillip Booth...and it describes the moment a father is teaching his daughter how to float on her back...as all swimming instructors teach, as a means of long term survival and comfort in the water. It has everything to do with learning to live in "The Cone of Uncertainty."

FIRST LESSON

Lie back daughter, let your head
be tipped back in the cup of my hand
gently, and I will hold you. Spread
your arms wide, lie out on the stream
and look high at the gulls. A dead-
man's float is face down. You will dive
and swim soon enough where this tidewater
ebbs to the sea. Daughter, believe
me, when you tire on the long thrash
to your island, lie up, and survive.
As you float now, where I held you
and let go, remember when fear
cramps your heart what I told you:
lie gently and wide to the light-year
stars, lie back, and the sea will hold you.

AMEN.