
When I was 14 years old, while visiting my family’s town in Southern Mexico, a group of friends invited me to climb to the church’s bell tower from where we could see the procession of people coming into the town to celebrate its annual festival. To get to the bell tower, we had to go through a dark and narrow spiral staircase. While looking forward to the view from the town’s highest building, the time we spent in the staircase seemed endless. I was afraid, mostly because it was hard to see beyond the step I was about to take, and it was the voices of the people I couldn’t see, but who were there with me, that encouraged me to keep going.

When we first received the notice to stay at home a few weeks ago now, I personally had plans—I signed up for free online courses and placed a pile of books next to my bed. I was going to make the best out of staying at home—only to find myself unable to read all that I wanted, with little motivation to complete all of the classes, trying to figure out how to balance my work at home and my family, who are with me all the time. I overestimated my energy and underestimated the range and intensity of emotions I was going to feel.

Maybe you’re past the initial shock, maybe you’re just understanding the seriousness of this pandemic, maybe you’re already grieving the loss of a loved one or fearing for your well-being.

There is no right way to go through this, so I invite you to simply acknowledge where you are, and from that place ask yourself what you need.

These are not normal times, we are in crisis, we are grieving, we are trying to survive. And the tasks we so easily did before, the work we felt so capable of doing, seems to take twice the amount of energy, double the effort.

We are trying to function while carrying the weight of an aching world around us: worrying about our well-being, about the health and well-being of our friends and family members, waiting patiently and impatiently for the moment we can regain a sense of normalcy or certainty, bracing ourselves for what is still yet to come.

Come back to what’s simple, to what’s essential, to what’s needed. To tending to your most basic needs, to reaching out to others, to hold each other in the sacred space created when we bear witness to each other’s struggles.

Don’t give in to the need to be perfect, to know it all, to have certainty. The answers we’re seeking aren’t readily available. The people around you are also holding deep questions, and simply holding the questions can help us dig deeper in ourselves, and collectively, as we veer our course toward tomorrow.

There may not be a lot of light around as we try to navigate this turning point, maybe we’re all in a very long and dark spiral staircase together trying to make our way out. Trusting the voices of our beloved friends and family reminds us they are with us, too. Blessing the light helps us see enough to keep moving forward, taking one day at a time, one moment at a time.

Whatever it is that is offering you some ground to keep moving, that is shining some light on your path, you hold on to it. Hold on to each other, hold on to this community, hold on to the science and facts that offer some clarity, hold on to the stories of average human beings working together to do the unimaginable, hold on to silly stories and the brief moments of grace and joy that still surprise us.

In the words of famous singer Fito Paez, “Who said that everything is lost? I come to offer my heart.” Come offer your heart. The love and compassion it holds is the light we need to keep going.

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Play and Creating Joy
By Rev. Kathleen Owens, Lead Minister

Our monthly worship themes are created by a team of lay leaders and worship staff months before the church year begins. It's surprising to me how often those themes fit within the chosen month. For example, March's theme was Loss, before we ever knew how relevant loss would be, due to COVID-19.

As we approached the month of May, I questioned how the theme of Play would fit in. And yet, mental health experts are telling us how important it is right now to find ways to laugh, to take in beauty, and to enjoy the life we have, as well as connecting and staying informed. We need play for our mental and emotional well-being.

I've heard of many of you who are playing games together through social media platforms or your phones. Families are having Game Nights, or periodic dance parties. We've always lived in the paradox of having to both save and savor the world and this time is no different. It takes courage to create joy in the midst of this crisis.

Our worship services will use Play to inspire you to be courageous while playing and experiencing joy. Creating virtual worship services in three languages at the same time has been a steep learning curve for us. There's a lot of behind the screen work that's being done by many. And yet, with all the learning and the work, this team has kept good humor and a sense of play—with many of our rehearsals filled with laughter and joy.

Each service requires much more work from our musicians and directors... who hold choir rehearsals differently, create arrangements for the screen, edit videos and, on cue, share screens so you can experience the uplifting music in our services. Stories are written or found, permission is sought to use them, and then they're translated and told in such a way as to be relevant and speak to people of all ages.

Sermons are written earlier in the week then sent off for translation and incorporated into a large script. Saturday rehearsals iron out the wrinkles, as we're led by the magic of our director, Anna Liza Smith. She ensures the service is broadcast, while others fill in the Closed Caption box, greet you as you enter the virtual worship or social hour and make sure the service loads on our website.

All of this could produce stress, and sometimes it does, but it also produces more laughter, singing, and joy as we do this work together for, and on behalf of, our congregation. We look forward to playing together more as a congregation.

Faithfully,
How to Talk to Children about COVID-19

By Kathleen Swift, Family and Lifespan Ministry Director

Like most of us, your fears and anxieties over the coronavirus COVID-19 are probably elevated right now. Although the risk for children and young adults appears to be less than for older adults, news of this pandemic is changing daily and is alarming. Many parents are wondering how to talk about it with their children in a way that is reassuring, but factual.

According to experts at the Child Mind Institute, it’s better to talk about it than avoid the subject. Your children have probably already seen people wearing masks and have heard stories from their friends. Not talking about it can make kids worry more.

Taking your cues from your child is best—ask what they’ve heard and how they feel. Give lots of opportunities for questions. Just hearing about the disease on the news may be enough to make them worry that they will catch it. (This is an excellent reason to limit their exposure to the news.) Be reassuring; let them know the disease is rare, and that kids have milder symptoms. Also, focus on what your family is doing to stay safe. Here’s a link to a kid’s book on the Coronavirus: Covid-19 Book for Kids.

Consider taking time off from news or allocating a time limit for reading or watching the news. Also, although it’s tempting to Google symptoms, it’s not a good idea—especially if you suffer from health anxiety. Try meditation. According to WebMD, even meditating 10 minutes a day can help you control and reduce stress and anxiety. If meditation doesn’t come easy to you, try this 20 minute guided meditation from the Mindful Movement: Mindful Movement.

Exercise is another excellent tool for reducing stress. It stimulates the production of endorphins (natural painkillers and mood elevators) and reduces adrenaline and cortisol, which are our body’s stress hormones. You can’t go to the gym (since it is likely closed) but you can take a walk or watch an exercise video. As of this writing, San Diego parks are mostly open. Here is a link to the San Diego Parks and Recreation Website that shows what closures there are, updated daily: Parks.

Don’t forget the importance of play for your kids! Doing crafts and baking are great—I recommend both—but getting physical is also imperative. Here is a link to “A Cosmic Kids Yoga adventure”: Yoga for Kids.

Finally, it’s extremely important to stay in community. Deciding to temporarily close the church did not come easy to our ministers—and the biggest angst was the idea of all of us not staying in community. So, our staff has been trying new ways to reach out. We have virtual meetings for parents, teens, and children. The teen groups are meeting virtually as part of their religious education program on Sundays plus two extra days for fun. The younger kids are enjoying this as well, especially as the weeks stretch into months.

Our kids have stayed home from school and are likely missing their friends. Try setting up a free Zoom chat, Skype, or Facebook streaming session for them. They’ll be needing connections with their school and church buddies just as much as they need to keep up with their studies.

I’d like to share your ideas about what to do with kids that are home from school. There is a lot of information out there with suggestions, but I’d love to hear from you about what has (and hasn’t) worked, so I can pass it along to everyone. Take care.
The Genesis of a Food Pantry

By Maureen McNair

Last June, four or five congregants attending the annual meeting in the Meeting House wrote down that their vision for the future of First UU included a food pantry or a soup kitchen. At the time, the primary concerns on the minds of most people at that meeting were things such as how we would respond to the offer from UCSD Medical Center to purchase our Hillcrest campus; whether we would expand our music, dance, and art programs; and, requests that we find more ways to enjoy meals together.

I didn’t believe those few requests to start a food pantry would make it into the top five goals of the new strategic plan the congregation was providing input for. But, those requests reflected such an acute and immediate need that, as a newly elected member of the Board of Trustees, I thought we should do something about them.

Six months later, in December, Rev. Tania Márquez told me yes, we could open a food pantry at our South Bay location in Chula Vista. In fact, congregants included some of the pantry’s first clients.

Since last December, the pantry has been increasingly providing food to the wider community. As we go to press, the pantry is distributing food to about 130 heads of household each week, representing about 500 people. The vast majority of our pantry clients now are Latinx families who speak English as a second language. The number of pantry clients grows every week.

A lot of ground work was needed before opening the pantry, starting right after the annual meeting last June. One of the most productive things I did was traipse around west Chula Vista one day last October with Andrea Travers. Andrea lives in the South Bay and was finishing a stint as Treasurer at Summit UU. We met because she had started attending services in South Bay.

Andrea and I were looking for an organization called South Bay Community Services. They had started in Chula Vista under a different name in the 1970s. Their advertised address was closed because the building had asbestos. We eventually found them in an office upstairs from a bank. A staff person there told me to attend a meeting the next week for a group of representatives from about 100 South County social services organizations.

I’ve attended that meeting every month since then. Our pantry has created partnerships with many people I’ve met there. In fact, the first big food donation to the pantry came from an organization I partnered with there. Many of the agencies who have social workers at that meeting—WIC (Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children), Catholic Charities, the Family Resource Centers, to name a few—also send their clients to our pantry.

There are many, many more stories about how our South Bay Food Pantry became the place it is today. Our dedicated volunteers are changing who we are as a church and how our community sees us. We can thank that handful of people from the annual meeting last year for steering us to do the right thing at the right time in the right place. At the moment, we’re another source of food for people who are suffering from the economic losses of the pandemic.

And, so, we see ourselves in our pantry’s fifth month.

Watch the weekly bulletin, The Window, for current information about the pantry.
Life’s Little Losses - a South Bay Reflection
By Marti Benjamin, a reflection from the South Bay Service on March 1, 2020

Len and I spent six weeks trying to escape winter weather, on the Sea of Cortez, near Guaymas, Sonora, where it was a bit warmer than here on the Pacific Ocean. We rented a beautiful hacienda style house, steps from the shore.

We settled in and adopted a daily routine: sleeping until the sun woke us, Len feeding and walking the dog while I cooked breakfast, enjoying the sun’s warmth while eating breakfast on the patio, watching the fishermen, a diver, brown pelicans, seagulls and an occasional bottlenose dolphin begin their daily routine right in front of us.

Getting acquainted with a new kitchen is always a bit challenging, but, after a few days, I could fix breakfast without too much difficulty. Until one morning when I lost the can of Pam Cooking Spray.

I knew I had used the spray, but in cleaning up after our meal, I couldn’t find it. I looked in every cabinet in the kitchen and every shelf in the pantry. When I didn’t find it, I expanded my search—the refrigerator, the patio, even the bedroom and bathroom, thinking I must have had it in my hand and set it down in another room.

With some embarrassment, I told Len that I couldn’t find the Pam and asked him to help me search for it. He repeated most of the steps I’d just covered and confirmed that it wasn’t in the kitchen cabinets, pantry, dining room, living room, bedroom or bathroom. As we stared at each other quizzically, I suggested we might have a poltergeist in this house, playing tricks on us.

We spent nearly an hour trying to reason our way through this dilemma. Where had I gone? What else was I doing when it disappeared? Where could it be? Feeling defeated by the mysterious disappearing can of Pam, we resigned ourselves to its loss and decided to move on with the day.

Then, I opened a kitchen drawer, and there was the missing can of Pam. Neither of us had checked that drawer because who would put a can of cooking spray in with the potholders?

My sense of relief was disproportionate to the $5.00 cost of the Pam; I was relieved that I hadn’t lost my mind! The real loss I felt had to do with my sense of personal mastery. What did it say about my mental capacity if I couldn’t handle cooking breakfast without losing something? And, was this a sign of aging? Would my adult children see me as failing and in need of an additional level of support? Was I, in fact, losing my ability to navigate my daily life competently?

Life’s small losses go beyond the obvious. Changing jobs may be exciting, challenging and rewarding, but there’s also the loss of relationship with co-workers, the loss of familiar surroundings and comfortable routines. Moving to be closer to family may mean losing friendships that were part of what made life rich and joyous in the old neighborhood.

In our fast-paced daily lives, we can lose sight of our losses, the micro-moments of pain or sadness that accompany our steps forward. What happens to that loss? Where does that small dose of unresolved grief reside?

I’ve noticed that unresolved emotions don’t shrink and go away. The can of Pam wasn’t important, but I was questioning my abilities and my self-reliance. I was actually grieving a bit over a perceived loss of competence because my familiar problem-solving skills and strategies hadn’t worked.

So, now we laugh about the disappearing can of Pam and acknowledge the need to pay closer attention to what we’re doing. Now, if we can only locate that bottle of shower tile cleaner that Len bought a week ago, used once, and we haven’t seen since.
Resilience: A Reflection

By Tony Brumfield

I want to begin my reflection on resilience by talking about the tree outside our window. That tree needs certain things to withstand difficult times. For one, it needs to be firmly rooted. The Earth not only holds it in place but provides nutrients. The tree needs water. When a tree doesn't get enough water, or the quality of its water is poor, the tree becomes vulnerable to disease. Trees also need air. Trees breathe. Trees need sunlight. Sunlight, water, and air are needed for trees to generate food. The temperature of the air can neither be too hot nor too cold. But trees need more than physical things. Trees thrive best in a forest. I must say that we human beings need the trees in our lives. Not just the trees but all the other living things in our world. And they need us. The resilience of this world very much relies on us human beings being responsible, not just for us, but for all of life.

Now, we human beings, in many ways, need the same things that the tree needs. We also need nutrients, clean air, clean water, and sunlight. We also need a forest of living things to sustain us.

When we humans talk about the relationship of health to resilience, we usually talk about eating right and exercising. The one thing that we usually don't talk about is sleep, giving our body the time it needs to recover. Our society even reveres people who brag about how little they sleep, but the science is clear. Every part of our body begins to disintegrate when it doesn't get the time it needs to recuperate. It becomes more difficult for us to focus our attention. Our ability to create memories and recall them, our ability to learn, and our judgment is compromised. We become irritable. Like a tree without water, we become more vulnerable to disease. If we do get sick, our ability to resist and recover is compromised. We become less resilient when we don't get the rest that our body needs.

Now, we must not think that there are people who are resilient and people who aren't. All of us have some resilience. I don't want us to value people who are more resilient over people who are less resilient. There are some in this world who have been challenged over and over again. There are some children in my school who have grown up in homes with substance abuse and so much violence that it feels normal. Some suffer from historical trauma because their people have suffered for generations. We mustn't throw these people away as if they're a lost cause, as if their lives could not possibly amount to anything of value.

Did you know, that right here in our mountains, there are oak trees and sometimes these oak trees get knocked over. Unlike in the city, in the mountains there is no street crew that drives up, cuts the tree into pieces, and hauls it away. In the forest, the tree just lies there. And in time, a miracle occurs. If any part of that tree's roots remains in place, the tree will sprout new branches and leaves. The tree is resurrected. It comes back to life. Human beings are that way. I've seen children in my school come back to life. If wounded human beings are provided with a safe environment and are provided opportunities for an education, work, and connection to a human community, they will come back to life. I've discovered resilience is an inherent part of every living thing. Provided a nurturing environment, all living things will come back to life.
On a warm, sunny day in March, San Diegans went to the polls. After showing identification, they received their ballots, stepped into voting booths, made their choices, handed the ballots to poll workers, and hurried off to work, home, or elsewhere.

Thousands of miles away, citizens of Azerbaijan, a former Soviet Republic surrounded by Russia, Iran and Turkey, showed up at polling stations on a cold, blustery day in February to choose members of the Azerbaijan Parliament. They showed IDs, took a ballot which they marked, returned it to the election officials, and stuck around to socialize with fellow voters.

Two places—16 hours apart by plane—each trying to make democracy work during a very unsettling and confusing period in history.

Azerbaijan is a country of 10 million people, about 98 percent of them Muslim—although they have 30,000 Jews, a revered community of Mountain Jews near the capital of Baku, and strong ties to Israel. There are also hundreds of thousands of Christians of various denominations. It’s a country of religious tolerance and diversity where Imams, Rabbis, and Ministers talk to one another.

Azerbaijan talks to not only Israel, but also Russia, Iran, China, the European Union, and the United States—its strong and long standing ally.

Oil and natural gas from the Caspian Sea provide much of the wealth for this country but there are also wind farms, solar stations, and other non-fossil forms of energy.

The best and brightest of Azerbaijan’s younger generation are being educated at universities in England and America, and then returning to leadership roles in society often succeeding older leaders who grew up in a Soviet-dominated era.

Azerbaijan, which is known as much for its music and art as its pomegranates and chess, connects people and places just as Central Asia connects East and West.

For almost 10 years, San Diego’s neighborhood of Switzer Highland (900 population)—which connects North Park and South Park—has enjoyed a cultural and educational partnership with the Nasimi District (215,000 population) of Baku, one of the most prestigious Districts in the Azerbaijan capital that also includes the U.S. Embassy. Working with the Azerbaijan Consulate General in Los Angeles, this partnership has engaged in more than 35 projects, including the 3rd Annual Baku Open Chess Tournament co-sponsored by Azerbaijan, the City of San Diego Downtown Library, the San Diego Chess Club, and the San Diego Press Club. Two of the top five chess Grandmasters in the world come from Azerbaijan.

On that cold, windy day in February, 2.5 million people voted, a 47.81 percent voter turnout, for 1,314 candidates, including more than 350 women, 22 of whom will represent women in the new 125-member Parliament. In 1919 Azerbaijan became the first majority-Muslim nation to give voting rights to women, even before the U.S.

Democracy is precious and fragile, in San Diego as well as Azerbaijan.

Martin Kruming chairs the Baku-San Diego Friendship Group and was an observer for the 2020 Parliamentary elections in Azerbaijan. He is a long-time member of First UU in San Diego.
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