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Arlington Street Church
26 February, 2017

Strengthening Our Spirits

We're looking a little ragged, dear ones. It's been a hard few months, and I don't think we can count on it letting up anytime soon.

Those of you who suffer with depression report feeling more undone than usual; those of us who do not suffer with depression report feeling, well, depressed.

Those of you whose first response to the election was not grief but anger are wearing thin. Anger is exhausting, and who's really sleeping soundly these days? A lot of us are fueling ourselves on caffeine and sugar, alcohol and drugs that you used to think of as recreational but don't really feel like so much fun anymore.

Clergy and psychotherapists of all stripes are staggering into group supervision sessions, trying to prop each other up. The cardiologists' offices are full of people who fear there's something wrong with their hearts, but there isn't ... or there is, but cardiologists don't fix broken hearts.

I remember this from the years I served in Provincetown – the AIDS years. Each new diagnosis was an unprecedented disaster, and we were up all night, night after night, trying to triage the symptoms. Here we are again, in a startlingly different set of circumstances, with the same feelings: shock, grief, anger, fear, despair, exhaustion.

All those years ago, there came a time when I realized we simply could not sustain that “emergency room” pace. We had to accept that the crisis was not going to abate anytime soon, and we had to change our mindset from sprint to ultra marathon. Here we are again, indeed.

African American writer, womanist, and civil rights activist Audre Lorde said, “Caring for myself is not self-indulgence. It is self-preservation and that is an act of political warfare.”

An organization called Finding Steady Ground produced a beautiful piece called *Strengthening Our Spirits to Resist and Thrive in These Times*. This morning, I’d like to share some thoughts on that with you, as well as a little bit from British author Helen Russell’s *The Year of Living Danishly* ... because of top of everything else, it’s winter, and the Danes know something about thriving in wintertime.

Let’s start with *Living Danishly*, shall we?

The Danes have spent centuries refining their climatic stoicism; Denmark is cloudy, overcast, and/or dark almost 64 percent of the time; think damp, chill-to-the-bones cold. And it never gets hot. In July, the highs are in the 60s.

Yet the United Nations consistently ranks Denmark the happiest country, while the United States is 13th, and falling. What’s their secret?

This was a new word for me – my first Danish word: *hygge*. Only I’m not saying it right. I’m going to spare you the throat-clearing pronunciation, but you get the idea, and you can practice saying it wrong with me, if you want: HUE-gah.

There’s no English translation, but here’s the feeling of the meaning: enjoying life’s small pleasures, and embracing the season. *Hygge* – both a noun and a verb – is spending frequent, low-key, unpretentious time indoors, cozy and candlelit; enjoying friends and family; eating uncomplicated, delicious food together. To *hygge* is simply to be together, face to face and heart to heart.

The Danes will tell us to set aside our distractions and our multi-tasking, and that hanging out online is not hanging out. The theme of *hygge* is connection, an elevation of simple pleasures in good company. To *hygge* is both an art and a pleasure – and the essence of a Danish winter.

Hygge is also about getting fresh air and mild exercise every day. It’s about enhancing positivity, wellbeing, and uplifting encounters. And Danes

are very big on traditions and celebrations. The winter months, in particular, are crammed with holidays, some sounding distinctly made up. One wonders, What is Dancing Cow Day? O, and there's a cake that goes along with each holiday!

We, too, can do this – easily! Instigate and initiate. Contact friends, family – everyone you love and miss. Annie Dillard wrote, “A good life is made of a series of good days, starting with today.” Let's set dates; make plans; look forward to *hygge*!¹

*“Joy in the face of hard times is not a luxury;
it is a necessity.”*

To this advice from Denmark, the folks at Finding Steady Ground add, Get together with other good-hearted people, not just for joy, but to face down despair and support each other to stay in motion. The goal is companionship and accountability. We can volunteer together, write postcards, create resistance art, plan a march ... and yes, do it over delicious food and something hot to drink. Let's check in on each other; ask, How are you holding up? What's helping you? Let's really listen and really answer.

Remember, says author Elizabeth Gilbert, “None of the other stuff is going to work if the animal that you live in is just a broke-down mess.” Here are five actions for our consideration:

First, Finding Steady Ground wants us to make a conscious decision about where and when we'll get our news, and what we'll do with it. What we choose to pay attention to affects us deeply.² Are we accessing news that helps us understand what's happening in the world, or does it only leave us feeling fearful and despairing? How much news do we need? Are we tethered to it? Addicted to it? This is worth some soul-searching.

Closely related to that, second, Finding Steady Ground wants us to take an intentional, deliberate break from social media. All the research says that too much social media leads to a sense of disconnection, anxiety, and

¹ Helen Russell, *The Year of Living Danishly* and Kate McCarthy, *The Danish secret to getting through winter*, 2/3/17. Please see nextavenue.org/the-danish-secret-to-getting-through-winter/

² I know, my sibling grammarians: *That to which we choose to pay attention....* But I just couldn't!

mental distress. The exposure to graphic images and reactionary language fuels our reptilian, fight or flight brain. Make and keep healthy boundaries. Think *hygge*.

Third, Finding Steady Ground wants us to make time to get really quiet inside. Reflect, meditate, pray. Just be. *Feel* the shock, grief, anger, fear, despair, exhaustion. Extend love to all who are suffering – including ourselves. And be sure to notice that suffering is never all of our reality: There is beauty in nature and music and art and books and small children. We love and we are loved.

Kentucky poet and farmer Wendell Berry writes,

When despair for the world grows in me
and I wake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.

I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting with their light. For a time
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.³

Fourth, Finding Steady Ground wants us to “read, listen to, or share a story about how others have resisted injustice.... Stories may be from ... activists who have been in the trenches, ... elders in [our] community, ancestors, ... or from around the globe.... The goal is to become a student of history, so that [we] can ... deepen our understanding ... and take inspiration ... [for] how to struggle and thrive.”

Fifth, Finding Steady Ground wants us to celebrate our creativity. It is so easy to fall down the rabbit hole of believing that we have no choice, that everything is happening *to* us. It is so important to tap into our reservoir of agency and power. We can practice creating small things – cook a meal, make a sign, sing a song, knit a hat – and remember that we are more than

³ “The Peace of Wild Things,” from *Collected Poems* (North Point Press, 1985)

reactors, more than consumers, and so build the muscle for creating big things: a movement, a revolution.

This beautiful directive is from iconic dancer and choreographer Martha Graham:

There is vitality, a life force, energy, a quickening that is translated through you into action, and because there is only one of you in all of time, this expression is unique. ... If you block it, it will never exist through any other medium and it will be lost. The world will not have it. It is not your business to determine how good it is nor how valuable nor how it compares with other expressions. It is your business to keep it yours clearly and directly, to keep the channel open. You do not even have to believe in yourself or your work. You have to keep yourself open and aware to the urges that motivate you. Keep the channel open.⁴

Beloved spiritual companions,

May we strengthen our spirits
to resist and thrive.

Let's consider
where and when we'll get our news.
Take a break from social media.
Get really quiet inside.
Share stories of resisting injustice.
Celebrate our creativity.

Caring for ourselves
is not self-indulgence;
it is self preservation.
Joy in the face of hard times
is not a luxury;
it is a necessity.

Let's *hygge!*

⁴ Martha Graham, in Agnes de Mille, *Martha: The Life and Work of Martha Graham*, p. 264