Heaven knows where we are going. Naomi Remen says that knowing where we are going “encourages us to stop seeing and hearing and allows us to fall asleep” and she contrasts that with the uncertainty of the other path – which can foster a sense of aliveness and appreciation for the particulars around you.

Remen goes on to say: “In fact, perhaps we only think we know where we are going as all the while we are really going somewhere quite different. The truth is that we are always moving toward mystery and so we are far closer to what is real when we do not see our destination clearly.”

We are closer to what is real when we do not see our destination clearly.

It is human nature to pass judgment of the events which befall us. But when we pass judgment quickly, our perceptions can be distorted. The ability to pass judgment quickly is very helpful when we needed to decide if a far-off creature is going to attack us for lunch, or whether it might be suitable as our meal.

But the very same quick judgments which helped us survive can hold us back when hunting or being hunted is no longer the immediate struggle of our daily lives. We are wise to learn to choose our actions, and not let our reactions choose us.

You’ve probably heard the story from the Taoist tradition, which could be more than two thousand years old. It’s a story of a farmer and his horse.

One day his horse runs away. And his neighbor comes over and says, to commiserate, “I’m so sorry about your horse.” And the farmer says “Who Knows What’s Good or Bad?” The neighbor is confused because this is clearly terrible. The horse is the most valuable thing he owns.

But the horse comes back the next day and he brings with him 12 feral horses. The neighbor comes back over to celebrate, “Congratulations on your great fortune!” And the farmer replies again: “Who Knows What’s Good or Bad?”

And the next day the farmer’s son is taming one of the wild horses and he’s thrown and breaks his leg. The neighbor comes back over, “I’m so sorry about your son.” The farmer repeats: “Who Knows What’s Good or Bad?”

Sure enough, the next day the army comes through their village and is conscripting able-bodied young men to go and fight in war, but the son is spared because of his broken leg.

And this story can go on and on like that. Good. Bad. Who knows?

Nevertheless, it is human nature to pass judgment, to use our judging minds to navigate the world. It is a spiritual practice to learn to suspend that same judgment in order to experience what is more real. “Perhaps we only think we know where we are going as all the while we are really going somewhere quite different,” writes Rachel Naomi Remen.
It’s a mystery.

That line from the movie, Shakespeare in Love, is an ongoing joke in my household. Perhaps you’ve seen the 1998 movie written by Tom Stoppard? It’s very loosely based on Romeo and Juliet. Which in this version is first titled Romeo and Ethel the Pirates Daughter, to give you a flavor of the humor. This line – it’s a mystery - is repeated quite often in this anachronistic narrative, beginning with this dialogue:

*Mr. Fennyman, allow me to explain about the theater business.*

*The natural condition is one of insurmountable obstacles on the road to imminent disaster.*

*So what do we do?*

*Nothing. Strangely enough, it all turns out well.*

*How?*

*I don’t know. It’s a mystery.*

From this point on, the line, It’s a mystery, is repeated – often when we, the audience, think we know the outcome, but the characters are left unaware.

I commend this line to you in times of uncertainty and confusion. Or perhaps it’s even more useful when we think we know what is going on, but are aware that our knowledge is incomplete. It’s a mystery.

It’s not true, of course, that it all turns out well, at least from a human perspective. It neither turns out well in Romeo and Juliet, nor Shakespeare in Love, nor sometimes in our own lives.

But it is true that what happens will someday be what has happened.

The value we put on the happening is ours. And that gives me hope. That someday, I will be able make meaning of the events, make sense of the world, and build a future from what has happened.

When we bring a child into this world, we do not know what her life will be. It’s a mystery.

And in fact, we all know that the story Karen told this morning about her first pregnancy could have just as well ended tragically. Though her pregnancy was not what she expected, she did have a live, healthy baby at the end, which is the best outcome possible, and, tragically, not always the case. It’s a mystery

When we bring a child into this world, we do not know what their life will be. Likewise, most of us do not know exactly what happens after we die. That also is a mystery.

That mystery gives me hope. Not knowing wakes us up, makes us alert, helps us notice things along the way that we might otherwise miss. And for that, I am grateful.

My hope lies in that mystery. Not that God has a plan. I personally don’t believe that. But that God, should God exist, is the creative energy which allows us to make it turn out well – allows us to turn tragedy into beauty if not comedy itself. It is a mystery, in my opinion, how that happens. It is a collaboration between the Universe, name it God if you like, and us.
It is easy to say that the worst thing that ever happened to me was that I was raped. As a young adult, while serving in the Peace Corps. A man I didn’t know entered the hut I lived in, threatened me with a knife, and raped me. I know this is not an uncommon experience, unfortunately, but it was not one for which I was prepared at the age of 24. I guess I don’t think it is ever an experience one can be prepared for. And I bring it up now, in fact, because of the recent spotlight shone on the experiences of rape and harassment and sexual misconduct – often, but not exclusively – perpetrated by men on women. And the hope that is present in this moment of time that this underlying cultural acceptance of misogyny and mistreatment of women may, in fact, change. That this moment, may be the point in time in which we as a nation, as a culture, as a world, wake up and take notice of things along the way that we might otherwise miss.

That this will lead to that day when we will be able to tell that night had ended and day was on its way back, that we look on the face of another human being and see there our sibling.

Now these recent revelations of men in power who used their power to treat women as objects of their control and sexual desire have not shocked me. Any woman who has been raped and who has told their story publicly, as I have, will also have heard the stories of countless other women who share their stories. We share the pain and shame. We know it is there, even if we don’t talk about it publicly – but even so, I realized this week – I think it was Friday – when the news source I listen to didn’t lead with another story about another revelation of sexual misconduct, I realized how distressing I was finding it to listen day after day to the story of yet another public figure accused of sexual misconduct – and I’ll admit, Al Franken, bothered me greatly because I read his Giant of the Senate book over the summer and enjoyed years of Saturday night live… and I was beginning to wonder if my husband was one of the only men alive who I could still believe to be virtuous and feminist and kind. The only man who could look on the face of a woman and see her as a fully human being.

So, the hope I find in this moment – this moment in which we are clearly seeing the world the way it is, not how we wish it to be or thought it was – the hope I find is not filled with unfettered joy. It is a hope that all the darkness and despair which seems to surround us in this historical moment of time, is only the mystery...

“The truth is that we are always moving toward mystery and so we are far closer to what is real when we do not see our destination clearly.” Says Naomi Remen.

I never hoped to be raped. I will never say I am glad I was raped or that it was a good thing or that the benefits outweigh the pain. I will only say that I constructed a life after having been raped, and that the life I constructed – though not pain free by any measure – has been meaningful. That experience aligned me with the experiences of too many women and many men and many people, and that I understand their experiences better. I understand the pain and shame of the women who are coming forward now, years after having been traumatized, only brave enough with the encouragement of other strong women and the temporary public spotlight.

Hope is our theme for December. And you may feel that I’ve become sidetracked. That I’m off subject. That I forgot the point. But that is not true. My hope lies in the mystery and the practice, that it will, with our honest hard work and integrity, turn out well in the end.

Hope is an attitude and a practice, a way of being in the world, a way of welcoming what is, even when we don’t know what will be. Even welcoming that which we don’t understand, didn’t ask for, and do not want. Grateful that life is more than what we understand. It’s a mystery. And not knowing is okay - and even hopeful.
What brings you hope now that you didn’t want then? Even in your worst moments, you can work to expose some hope. If you can’t think of any reason to be hopeful, reduce it to simple gratitude. Be grateful for your breath, or food, or the sun. Be grateful if your body doesn’t hurt in this moment, or a stranger smiled at you today. It doesn’t have to be profound. But noticing is a part of the practice, and it honestly changes what it is you notice, which then changes what it is you experience, and before you know it, your gratitude and hope multiplies.

When we don’t know where we’re going, sometimes we notice our surroundings a bit more. Rather than rushing ahead, we pay attention to what is, and are thankful. That gratitude brings hope.

The mystery of death often brings tremendous gratitude. The mystery of death is on my mind today as we prepare to honor the life of one among you, Carolee Allen.

I wear this stole today, in fact, in memory of my grandmother who died some years ago. She taught my mother to embroider who taught my sister and me to embroider. My sister created this stole and did most of the embroidery work on it, but my grandmother, mother, and niece also sewed stitches on it. It was given to me on the day of my ordination by the Unitarian Universalist Church of Greater Lansing. Love is sewn into it, and that love is palpable for me when I wear it.

The mystery of the sea is at one end, and the mystery of the sky at the other—life represented in between.

That life, as much as we seek to understand it, remains a mystery, so that we may notice it, attend to it, nurture it, and be grateful for it. That mystery gives me hope.

“Perhaps we only think we know where we are going as all the while we are really going somewhere quite different”

So what do we do?

Nothing. Strangely enough, it all turns out well.

How?

I don’t know. It’s a mystery.

Benediction

As we work toward a planet transformed by our care, may we find hope in the mystery. We will know that night has turned into day, not when we can tell the fig tree from the peach tree, but when we look on the face of another human being and see them as family. We do not know when that light will come, only that it will. May such hope live in your heart and in our community.

* Sermons are meant to be spoken and not written. I have not edited this sermon to written form.