Take a walk to remember that love’s not dead. Stuart wrote that the day after the 2016 presidential election when many of us were stunned and shocked and needed to remind ourselves that love wasn’t dead. He was on the road to a songwriter’s retreat, and I was home alone in Michigan working, trying to help a congregation that was reeling from the results. You might recall that the results in Michigan were critical to the outcome.

It felt like an upending of the world. And then there’s now. Another upheaval, more uncertainty, more fear... the challenge that confronts us requires our attention and focus, those spiritual practices we talked about in February, the letting go we practiced in March, that we might come to save our lives.

Now, usually, in a Unitarian Universalist context, I get a considerable resistance to the theological theme of salvation. Often, our people are the ones with the bumper stickers on their cars which declare ‘born OK the first time,’ a not so subtle rejection of the concept of being ‘born again.’

But I suspect that this April, April of 2020, while the world is undergoing a biological upheaval – earth uprising, the theological theme of salvation sounds quite different than the kind that treats abstract notions of heaven or hell. We are taking our salvation quite literally these days – “one day you finally knew what you had to do” wrote Mary Oliver.

That poem, which I’ve had for years in my repertoire, sounds quite different to me today. Before, when I’ve read it, I’ve been in midst of people – maybe not as I read the poem, but before and after, I’d be surrounded by people, people would be all around – “the voices around you shouting their bad advice” that line brought to image those people, figuratively and actually touching me, people who crowded me and made it hard for me to hear my own voice.

Now, as I read the poem, solitude is the order of the day. Stuart is my physical companion, along with our dog, Nutmeg. Those voices that cry “mend my life” touch me only on the phone, or through email, zoom, or text. They don’t actually touch me, and that fact, somehow, makes the poem sound different.

I’m not sure how relevant that difference is to the overall message. But I just noticed it, and so I wanted to share that fact.

Noticing ourselves and our surroundings, our reactions, thoughts, and feelings, our habits and pattern of thought – that is some of what the spiritual practices we studied in February
accomplish. The work we do to cultivate the spirit or our wholeness helps us to notice things differently, understand the world from a new perspective, ultimately, to help us change our lives. Not because our lives are not OK already, because some of them are – you were born OK the first time – but because there is always more we can be and do and become.

Crises often create that feeling of liminal space – a time of transformation and transition. The memories during those times get catalogued differently in our brains. We remember those blizzards of our childhood like the one John Rocco wrote about that Amy shared with us. We remember the boredom as if it went on forever – the six days of being stuck at home registers an entire month in our memory.

At least that’s been my experience with this sequester so far. This is only my second time preaching from this chair here at home. I addressed you the two Sundays before that from an empty sanctuary while you watched at home, and yet this has felt like a month of Sundays, dragging on forever.

The expression *a month of Sundays*, references 30 days of Sundays in succession – Sunday, being the dreariest day of the week, apparently, because in the olden days or in some traditions still, you’re not allowed to do certain things, like working and shopping. So that kind of fits. This *Stay at Home, Stay Healthy* order has altered our sense of time and place, as well as limiting our activities. It has altered our experience and, I hope, our understanding of that experience.

In February, I talked about how it is important to begin a spiritual practice when you are not in crisis, so that when you are in crisis, your practice is already a habit and not hard to do. I don’t know about you, but I am finding many things hard to do lately. Things that used to be routine I somehow find challenging in these conditions. I thought I was good about brushing my teeth after every meal. My dentist always gives me a good report. It turns out, it was the act of leaving the house and encountering others that was my real cue for brushing my teeth in the morning. Not breakfast. I would brush my teeth because I wanted them clean and my breath fresh for you. Now that I no longer go out of the house to visit you, I need a new cue for brushing my teeth in the morning.

My meditation practice, however, is something I do first thing in the morning. I’ve been doing it two years this April. For the first year or maybe more, I would do it lying in bed – which was sometimes irritating to my partner in that bed, and so now I have a routine where I slip out of bed and go to a chair in the living room. Rarely is Stuart up before my meditation is over, but sometimes he is and he has learned to ignore me in my meditation chair. It works. I haven’t missed a day of meditation in this month of Sundays – although I have done it twice out of order – that is, not first thing. Both times it was because I slept poorly and slept in, and then didn’t want to meditate at the beginning of my work day. But I managed to do it later in the day on those exceptions, and I consider that a personal victory. It helps me. It helps me greatly, and I’m thankful for the practice.
I just imagine that you are noticing things in this time, your own habits of thought and action. You may be, like me, struggling with habits that had been routine, or wanting to develop some healthier habits to help you get through this difficult time,

*But little by little,*
*as you left their voice behind,*
*the stars began to burn*
*through the sheets of clouds,*
*and there was a new voice*
*which you slowly*
*recognized as your own,*
*that kept you company*
*as you strode deeper and deeper*
*into the world,*
determined to do
the only thing you could do --
determined to save
the only life that you could save. (Mary Oliver)

We have been thrust into a different way of being in the world, and our salvation lies in the hope that it helps us learn a different way of being in the world – when this is over, when “normal,” whatever that is, returns to our lives. That we apply our lessons from this time when we no longer have to concentrate so hard to remember to brush your teeth... or plug in your particular challenge there. Brushing your teeth may not be it.

As Ronnie so wisely explains, it is about being in the moment. He wanted to change his life and so he learned new coping skills, by reading and learning, exploring the past and the mysteries in the family stories – this work, this hard work, of saving the only life you can save, has ripple effects on others. Ones’ children or grandchildren, ones’ family and friends, and yes, those in the same congregation or faith tradition – and beyond – those we pass on the street as we walk at a safe social distance.

Have you noticed how friendly people have become? Well – I suppose – it goes both ways.

I have noticed how many people in my neighborhood wave as they pass to greet me. It feels like an acknowledgement that we’re all in the same boat now. We have always been on the same planet, but we’ve not always recognized that. I remember the kindness of a woman who gave me her shopping cart as she finished up when the store had none left – this is in the early days when we were all shopping in great numbers knowing we’d soon be stuck at home. She wiped the handle of the cart with a wet wipe as she gave it to me and we shared a knowing smile.

And, unfortunately, there are opportunists who are taking advantage of this moment and preying on a fearful people. The person who used my name recently to create a gmail account
that sounds like me, trying to casually ask some of you for a favor, which I sincerely hope none of you fell for. I know that many of you heard the story on public radio this week about security issues with zoom and some of these tools that many of us are learning for the first time ever and how some folks are abusing the platform to harass and hurt others. It is just so dispiriting that people can be so damaged that they seek to damage others.

When we’re on a steep learning curve, like some of us have been, with the technology, it can be easy to get fearful about that technology, what we don’t understand. And then as we begin to understand it, it changes. This weekend, with all that heightened awareness of security breaches in zoom, they made some modifications to the program— and, of course, implemented them over the weekend, causing disturbance to Saturday yoga classes and making churches all over the country scramble to figure out if we could make worship work, as so many in the church world— well, at least the UU church world, have been operating on zoom. But we’re here. We did it. Thanks to your director of lifelong learning, Amy, and nursery attendant, Katherine, and so many more behind the scenes making this work.

I shared in the Tuesday bulletin we’ve put out— a new thing, focused on our response to the pandemic— a syllabus shared with me by member, Tracy Reilly-Kelly, who got it in her email at Clark College. This was that adjusted syllabus for a course in Religion in America taught by Brandon Bayne at University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. He wrote me a nice note when I asked permission to publish it in our newsletter.

“Thank you for reaching out,” he wrote. “These are trying times, and I am humbled to have contributed something that my fellow educators have been able to use to give themselves and their students some space to breathe. As someone also involved in ministry work... I’m delighted to know it translates into your congregational context as well!”

His syllabus has five guiding principles which, with his permission, I’ve adapted for you:

1. Nobody signed up for this— not for the sickness, not for the social distancing, not for the sudden end of our collective congregational life. Not for online worship, not for remote chalice circles, not for mastering new technologies, not for varied access to congregational offerings. Not for the indefinite postponement of weddings and memorials.
2. The human option is the best option. We are going to prioritize supporting each other as humans. We are going to prioritize simple solutions that make sense for the most. We are going to prioritize sharing resources and communicating clearly.
3. We cannot just do the same thing online. Some activities are no longer possible. Some expectations are no longer reasonable, some objectives are no longer valuable.
4. We will foster spiritual nourishment, pastoral care, and personal accommodation. We will return to old fashioned tools such as the telephone, and new technologies such as zoom. We will make accommodations for different access to and experience with technology.
5. We will remain flexible and adjust to the situation. Nobody knows where this going and what we’ll need to adapt. Everybody needs support and understanding in this unprecedented moment.

You can see why his wise words have taken off. He speaks the truth. To the fact that we don’t know where this is going- heaven knows where we are going – and we’ll need to adapt. That the human option is the best option and that everybody needs support and understanding in this unprecedented moment.

The challenge that confronts us requires our attention and focus, those spiritual practices we talked about in February, the disciplines, the rituals, the things we do, over and over again, that help us stay grounded, be attentive, and alive and present. We need to practice being present. Most of us have learned to survive the ugliness and violence of life by tuning it out, and we can forget to tune back in.

The challenge that confronts us requires the letting go we practiced in March, letting go of judgment – as you look at people without judgment, you will see them more clearly and with more compassion – and letting go of control – noticing what we can change and what we must accept. And let go physically – loosen those muscles and bones. Let go the weight of the world.

Our response to this challenge might come to save our lives. Salvation is our theme this April. May you be determined to do the only thing you can do, to save the only life you can save.