

GETTING THROUGH HARD TIMES

SERMON BY

REVEREND KATHLEEN HEPLER, KARIN CHARLES & MICHAEL CARUSO

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INTRODUCTION – Rev. Hepler

The snow comes and there is a certain rightness about its arrival. It is winter as it should be in New England. It is seasonable and we expect it and so be it. It is beautiful and inevitable and part of the rhythm. We need those things that help us order this life we have. Like arriving here on a Sunday morning and saying together our opening words, our covenant. And like seeing that the garlands are hung and it is the time of the winter holidays once again.

Still, the unexpected is always pushing at the edges of our lives. We get out the snow shovels, the mittens and the winter decorations as we do....but every human knows the rising up of things small and large that are unbidden, not planned for.....UNIMAGINABLE EVEN.

Now these surprises are frequent and relentless through our lives. And, many, so many, are delightful and some are dramatically transforming in a positive way. Like getting pregnant when you had been told you couldn't and you dearly wanted to, or when you turn a corner on your morning walk and a glorious pair of swans on the lake take your breath away, or falling in love at 64. It is easy to call these unexpected happenings or unplanned twists of our lives "blessings", "grace", "gifts". Then, it is easy to give thanks.

And every one of us has had to face those detours, those moments, those huge experiences that cause us fear and pain and a total reordering of what we thought our lives were going to be. This is our theme today. The hard times and how we get through them. What are they like and what do they call forth in us? And, what sustains us when we are smack dab in the middle of the unbidden, the unknown, the tragic or the painful? How do we get through it? And, what good purpose (if any) is there to the life beyond the extremely difficult?

What can we learn? What do we learn? Can these times ever be called gifts, or grace-filled blessings?

I loved the end of the "Simpsons" movie. Upon learning that the end of the world was nigh, the people in the bar headed for church...and the people in the church fled to the bar!!! A humorous and "all-too-close-to-true" possibility!

Our theme today: what helps us get through the unimaginable?

These two gracious human beings have agreed to share their stories with us today. Both of them experienced dramatic turns in their lives for which they were not prepared. Both of them described this part of their life story as “unimaginable”. And, while there are striking differences in their stories, there is an undercurrent of similarity as well. Neither Mike nor Karin want you to hold their stories as prescriptive of “the right way”. Both of them have a heightened respect for the varying ways that people cope and survive through the hard times.

We have our lives to experience and we have our stories to share and Karin and Mike offer two such stories today as gifts to our community. I thank them in advance for their willingness and their courage, their authenticity and their openness.

Karin Charles

On September 11, 2001, my family’s life was changed forever. When my husband, Ken, woke up that morning and kissed me goodbye, he fully intended and expected to come home that evening, as he did every other day before. However, horrific events happened that morning that forever prevented his return. Ken worked on the 99th floor of the North Tower at the World Trade Center in NYC. He worked for Oracle, a major software company, and was on assignment at Marsh & MacLennan for nearly a year.

I had just gotten out of the shower. Ethan was napping and Olivia was watching Dora the Explorer on TV. The phone rang and my girlfriend had asked if Ken was at work in NY that day. When I told her that he was, she told me to put the news on. I lost my breath when I saw the building in flames. I knew immediately that he was gone. That doesn’t mean that I didn’t hope and pray to be wrong. My brothers went into the city with “missing” posters and called around to all the hospitals with a physical description including what he was wearing that day...khaki pants with a black polo shirt with thin white stripes. After several days, it was more than obvious that he wasn’t coming home, and I now had to figure out how to explain this to my kids. There were hotlines to call for support. I called and asked them, “How do I tell my young children that their Daddy isn’t coming home?” Not surprisingly, they didn’t have an answer. Ethan was only 14 months old and too young to understand. Telling Olivia, who was 3, that her father had died was the hardest thing I ever had to do. I don’t know that she fully understood when I told her, but she knew that it was serious. She cried and told me that she missed him and wanted him home. I cried with her and told her that I wanted that same thing.

The events of 9/11 affected people worldwide, even those that didn’t suffer a personal loss. I had a friend come over to visit with me and I remember she just starting weeping. I put my arm around her and hugged her. I remember thinking how funny it was that she came over to comfort me with my loss and here I was telling *her* everything would be okay! It wasn’t easy mourning the loss of my husband publicly along with the nearly 3,000 other families affected, as well as the general public. I was very thankful and appreciative for the community support that I received. People I had never met before were raising money to help us through. Many brought meals so it would be one less thing to have to think about that day. My neighbor’s son Ryan asked her what he could do to help. He decided to bake cupcakes with his friends and sell them in front of our local supermarket. He and his friends were so proud to come to my house and present me with the money raised. Other neighborhood kids in the area did similar things. Everyone seemed to feel the need to do something, anything to help. I received cards and letters from school

children all around the country. It was a very powerful experience. It's that sense of community that my family was looking for and has now found here at First Parish.

Grief is a personal journey. There is no right way, or wrong way. Just your way. A lot of women I had met in support groups were questioning their belief in God. How could He do something so devastating? I grew up a non-practicing Catholic and I wasn't sure what I thought of God at that time. What did Ken do to deserve to die this way? What had I done to be left with this pain and sorrow? Were we being punished? Or maybe it was all part of a bigger plan that we didn't know about? Maybe it was for some greater purpose? Or maybe it just was. I was left simply to wonder, "Why?"

The question of heaven came up several times in our house. Was Daddy in heaven? I didn't know the answer because I had to figure out if I believed in heaven. It's certainly a nice thought. To go somewhere after we die that's full of love and happiness – a place where all of our pain disappears. I told Olivia that yes Daddy is up in heaven. To this day, Olivia and Ethan call Dennis, "Daddy" and Ken, "Daddy Up In Heaven".

Life wasn't necessarily easy. I had suddenly become a full-time single parent. Unexpectedly though, I had discovered a sense of independence and empowerment. I realized that I was fully capable of doing things myself without relying on someone else to do it. I could pay the bills, I could fix things in the house, and I could make independent decisions. I realized that I now alone was responsible for my children and how they grew up. Who were they going to become?

I had a choice to make. Which path was I going to take? The one of woes, pity and eternal sadness? Or the other – the one that I did choose – to be resolute, resilient, strong and full of vitality. I didn't pick that path because "Ken would have wanted me to" – although I'm sure he would have. I chose it for my children. I knew that I had to model for them what a person is capable of when faced with adversity. Right then and there I chose what story I was going to live. I was going to write my life's story – not leave it to chance or have other people write it for me.

Part of that story came to be two years later in the fall of 2003, when I was fortunate to meet another wonderful, loving man who was willing to love me and my children. Dennis and I were married in 2004 and now have 2 more beautiful kids with another on the way!

We have lots of pictures of Ken around the house and we celebrate his birthday every year by making a cake and singing Happy Birthday. We talk about him whenever somebody wants to. We keep his spirit alive and soaring. Ken's family shares stories of when he was young. We celebrate his life and who he was while on this earth. We focus on what a great person, father and husband he was and how much he loved us. He's alive in Olivia and Ethan and I have the privilege of seeing him through their soul.

I've always liked the saying – "Yesterday is history. Tomorrow is a mystery. Today is a gift. That's why it is called the present." I feel it's best to live in the moment and to appreciate all that is present. Do what you love and love what you do.

Some of you may have seen the movie, *The Shawshank Redemption* with Tim Robbins and Morgan Freeman. Tim Robbins character, Andy Dufresne, is in prison for something he didn't do, however, he would not let his grim circumstances keep him from hope and pursuing his dreams. At a pivotal point in the movie he says that it comes down to a simple choice, "Get busy living, or get busy dying."

Life is short so make it the best it can be!

Michael Caruso

MOJO

For those of you who do not know me, my name is Mike Caruso; I live in Ashland with my wife Amy and 3 daughters, Isabella, Julia and Anna. We have been a coming to First Parish Since 2005. I am an Electrical Engineer, I love being a husband and dad, being active and writing/playing music.

In July of 2006 I was diagnosed with Leukemia. I was diagnosed on a Thursday and the following Monday I checked in to Mass General Hospital for the first of several extended stays. The weekend in between being diagnosed and starting chemo had an eerie calm about it. The weather was just great, we took family photos, played in the backyard, went out for ice cream and tried to explain to the kids what to expect. How I would be in the hospital for the next 30 days. We said try to think of it like I was on a long business trip.

During this time, I found I put my engineer training and management experience to good use. I asked a lot of questions and made suggestions when I thought appropriate. I found that I had a great working relationship with the staff at MGH and today, they are like family. They always ask me about Amy and the kids and I got to know about their lives outside of work. I have never met a group of such selfless individuals who give everything they can to their patients.

For some reason, I never felt an overwhelming sense of panic. They say that ignorance is bliss. It was a rocky road but I tried to take things one step at a time. Treatment took about 6 months and finished with a bone marrow transplant where I was my own donor and I was home for Christmas.

It would be at least 4 months before my immune system was strong enough to go back to work so I basically had the winter and spring to recover. During this time, I tried to eat right, drink plenty of water, get exercise in the form of walks or stationary bike. I found when I did these things I simply felt better both mentally and physically. I also started to play a lot more music. I found while I was playing music, I did not think about other things. With the encouragement of an acquaintance who turned into a great friend, I began to organize my original music. That summer we went to a real recording studio which was something I always wanted to do. What started out as a way to document my music and my playing, turned into a fundraising project called Jazzed for a Cure, and culminated with a concert right here in Scott Hall.

About a month after our concert here which was one of the highlights of my life, I developed an infection and had to be rushed to the hospital. We unfortunately found that the Leukemia had returned and I had to start my treatment all over again. This time it was physically more challenging an a lot harder mentally. I really felt like we had the rug pulled out from under us.

I was feeling I did not have control over anything anymore but my body pushed on. Then one day, the music therapist who I met the previous year visited my room. Somehow, she got me to try my guitar which had been sitting in the room untouched. At first my fingers did not know what to do. We played "You Are My Sunshine" which was something I used to play for my kids at bedtime. That day was both an emotional high and low point for me. A realization of what was lost and what could be gained. After that I

started to feel different. As I look back on that moment, I now realize that music gave me a sense of control again. I could choose the song, the tempo and the feel.

For me the loss of control and waiting was the most unnerving aspect of my situation. This feeling is not unique to the patient. I think in many ways it is harder on one's immediate family and friends. The patient is what I would call an active participant whereas one's partner, children and family have to watch and wonder and sometimes from a distance. While the patient is home, the partner becomes the primary caregiver doing medical procedures they never thought of and at the same time continue to care for things such as children and the house. For us, the child care help and moral support from our family and neighbors, the countless meals from all of you was truly life saving and our thanks goes out to everyone.

In November of 2008, I had my second Bone Marrow Transplant. The donor is unrelated to me. I only know that it is a woman in her fifties. Yes, if I was not completely surrounded by a houseful of women, my blood DNA is now that of a woman. I recently filled out the paperwork so that one day we can make contact. I have yet to hear anything back. I do hope to someday talk or meet with her and thank her for most generous gift.

Unbelievably, the transplant took only 3 weeks. I was home for Thanksgiving. Just over a year ago now. Recovery was physically and mentally much harder. I was on more restrictions and I would not be allowed to even think about returning to work until June. I relied on my experience from the previous transplant. I went for walks, especially outside walks. Someone recently said to me when I talked about enjoying the fall weather during my walks, that God is in the trees. I do believe that, I often find I do a lot of meditating while outside.

I felt tremendous anxiety as I continued my recovery. With the help of a local therapist, I was learning to live in the moment. As Pema Chudron said, what happened only 5 minutes ago was now just a memory and none of us can predict tomorrow. If I felt physically fine that moment, I had to go with that and move forward despite my mental state. I did in fact start back to work in June. I found getting back to work a huge mental more challenge. I had been teaching myself to live in the moment, yet work was all about the future. When will this report be ready, when can you get back to me with a fix for what is broken. At the same time, I was enjoying being technical again and solving problems.

When Ted Kennedy past over the summer it added to my challenges. As much as I tried to compartmentalize my thoughts, reminders of dealing with Cancer were seemingly everywhere. At this time I came across an interesting Op-Ed piece. The premise was that ones dealings with Cancer should not be described as a battle. The author took issue with headlines such as Ted Kennedy lost his battle with Cancer. To this author, the words fight and battle implies that someone can radically change the outcome by the tactics they employ. This is partially true, working with a talented medical team that can react quickly to unplanned events. Doing ones part to follow doctor's orders and restrictions are both critical. Every case is different, but for me, following these instructions, did not keep me free of the disease so I understood what she meant. From a physical perspective, I believe fight and battle are not the right words. I am still looking for better ones if anyone has some ideas. From a mental perspective, I do believe fight is an appropriate description. It does take determination, training and a variety of techniques that one can routinely employ to push through obstacles.

Over this past summer I realized I just wanted to be me again and without all the worry and anxiety. At first I did use mantras like I want my fight back. Even before I read the article, this did not seem appropriate. This morphed into I want my vim and vigor back. Not very poetic. Austin Powers calls it “Mojo”, which in the dictionary is defined as an indescribable magic quality and I get a kick out of that movie, so now in my head I say “I need my Mojo”. I find this feeling comes from many places. A simple hug or smile from my wife and children. A phone call from a friend, old pictures of me and my friends from high school showing up on facebook. A melody in the song I am writing.

There is a saying in marathon training that I like. “Race your strengths and train your weaknesses. Making time to practice ones strengths does return much satisfaction and yet I need to remind myself to do so. Training my weaknesses is also a work in progress. For those of you who know who the Fly Lady is, she suggests fifteen minutes a day as a place to start. Trying to do it all in one day can just lead to burn out. For the things I have control over, I work on that a little at a time. For the others, I did seek out help and techniques that can help put them out of my mind when necessary. Sounds simple I know, but simple does not always mean easy.

At this point things are going in the right direction. I sometimes feel that by saying this out loud is risky. My goals are simple. Be a good husband, father, brother, son, neighbor and coworker and I desperately want to get back to fundraising. I do my best to be in the moment and not let the future get in the way of today. It is not always easy or possible but most days it is. In an odd way, I do truly feel lucky. Again I do not want to say that too loudly, but to have access to some of the best medical care in the world, have a company that stood by me and to be surrounded by a loving family and community, I have a lot to be thankful for. My heart breaks for those that do not have similar surroundings.

No question, besides my college chemistry finals, this has been the most challenging time of my life and I could not have done it and keep doing it without the care and support of my loving family, the medical team and this community. I am forever thankful for the lessons and inspiration I have learned from those around me and this peaceful sanctuary. My life has been forever changed and I do believe in a good way. May all of us find a little bit of Mojo everyday and pass it on.

CONCLUSION – Rev. Hepler

I thank you Karin and Mike for being willing to shine a light on your hard time. We notice that in so doing you have made radiant the resiliency of the human spirit and the need we have for one another. We heard from both of you about decision points when you shifted into a certain resolve about how you would lead your life going forward. We remembered in ourselves through your sharing that we humans have much control of our lives and that we humans have so little control; that this being human most often requires navigating the paradox...knowing when and what we can control and knowing when to let go, to surrender, knowing when weeping is healing and when it is keeping us from healing, taking things seriously and taking things lightly. We are sustained by the reminder of the importance of love and community and small gestures like hugs and smiles and cupcake drives and handing a person their guitar and encouraging them to make music again.

We thank you the reminder to find as much joy and love as we can in every present moment instead of looking backward with regret or forward with dread.

We may speak of these most difficult times in our lives in ways that reflect various beliefs and spiritual beliefs: Some will say that life happens and we cope the best we can. Some will say that the hand of god is always present in the unfolding of a life and meant to teach us the truths of the spirit. Some will say that there is great mystery afoot, and as we go through our lives there is an increasing invitation to abide in that mystery and see what we can dimly see there....that our understanding of life becomes less certain, yet , more inarticulately “true” as we live it.

More and more in my own life I go to the poets who say the truth slant and open up that mystery beyond the either/or. To conclude our service I share a few snippets from the poets, the music makers, and the philosophers:

“Hello what are you afraid of?”

“Death.”

“Me too.”

“When you hear a Mahler symphony?”

“No, when I wake up in the night.”

“Me too.”

“Nice meeting you.”

“Same here.”

Marilyn Sandburg, *When They Revolutionize the Cocktail Parties*

Ch-ch-ch-ch-Changes

(Turn and face the strain)

Ch-ch-Changes

Oh, look out you rock 'n rollers

Ch-ch-ch-ch-Changes

(Turn and face the strain)

Ch-ch-Changes

Pretty soon you're gonna get a little older_

David Bowie

In the difficult are the friendly forces,

The hands that work on us.

Rilke

Learn the alchemy

true human beings know.

The moment you accept

what troubles you've been given,

the door will open.

Rumi

The last of the human freedoms
is to choose one's attitude
in any given set of circumstances.

Victor Frankl. *Man's Search for Meaning*

Here is the Book of thy Descent
Here begins the Book of the Holy Grail,
Here begin the terrors,
Here begin the miracles.

The Grail Legend

In our sleep, pain, which cannot forget,
falls drop by drop upon the heart,
until, in our own despair, against our will
comes wisdom through the awful grace of God.

Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*

O stand, stand at the window
As the tears scald and start;
You shall love your crooked neighbor
With your crooked heart.

W.H. Auden, *As I Walked Out One Evening*

Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?
Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?

Mary Oliver from, *The Summer Day*

Yesterday is history. Tomorrow is a mystery. Today is a gift.
That's why it is called the "present".
Do what you love and love what you do.
Life is short so make it the best it can be."

Karin Charles

May all of us find a little bit of Mojo everyday and pass it on.

Mike Caruso