

Joan and I had a misunderstanding this week. She has been urging me to adopt a healthier lifestyle and I've been resisting. I sat down this week and looked at our finances and I have just enough money to last until, um, about 6:45 tonight. If I live beyond that, I'll have to come up with more money.

But I lost the argument, so this past Tuesday night we went to yoga. I've been losing my hearing, so when Joan first started talking about yoga, I thought she was talking about yogurt, and said, "Sign me up for some of that!" So she did, and now every Tuesday night we take yoga classes and contort our bodies in ways God never intended.

This past Tuesday night, we began with simple movements which grew increasingly intricate as the hour progressed. There I was, with my right leg curled behind my head, and I got to thinking how yoga was a good metaphor for life. In life, you find yourself in these positions, in these situations. You have no idea how you got there. It is uncomfortable and getting more so, and you'd like to extricate yourself from the situation, but don't know how to do that without harming yourself or someone else even further. Isn't that life?

When I was younger, before I was married, I knew a man who'd lost his job and he asked if he could stay at my apartment for awhile. For some reason, I thought he meant supper, but the next thing I knew he'd moved his clothes into my apartment and was sleeping on the couch. He woke up every morning at five o'clock to say his prayers out loud, which was around the time certain aspects of evangelical Christianity really began to annoy me.

I'd just met Joan and had invited her up to my apartment one evening to see my etchings. We were sitting on the couch, which now smelled of night sweats. The man was sitting across from us. I inched my hand across the couch to hold Joan's hand and the man cleared his throat and frowned and began reading aloud from the book of Leviticus. How do you extricate yourself from that?

This is life. We find ourselves in difficult or painful or awkward situations and we're not sure how things will work out. I was talking with a woman this past week who is going through a divorce. Her husband is abusive, but she hates the idea of divorce because they have small children. She wants to preserve her family, but she can no longer live with this man and his tyranny. So she's caught in this painful situation, wanting and needing to be safe and loved, but also wanting her family to be intact. No matter what she does, someone will be hurt.

So we sometimes find ourselves in awkward and painful circumstances. It would be easy to despair and to lose hope, to become so weighed down with our struggles that life just becomes a long and bitter slog through the mud. And we all know people whose life has become that. It's hard to fault them, because they often have ample reason to be discouraged and feel defeated. We think, "Well, if I had her life, if I had his life, I might be that way, too."

But then there are other people who've also experienced difficult and painful situations, but they have this ability to move forward with optimism and hope and good cheer. We look at them and think to ourselves, "Boy, I hope when life deals me the hand it has dealt them, I can respond as they've responded." And make no mistake, the difficulties of life will visit us all. No one is exempt, no one immune.

I was talking about this not long ago with another pastor, about our varied responses to difficulties, and he said, "That's a no-brainer. The people who respond well to difficulty have more faith, they trust God." I've never cared for that explanation. It strikes me as unkind to say to someone who's been hit hard by life, "You wouldn't be in this situation if you just trusted God a little more. You wouldn't be so discouraged if you had faith." That's salt on a wound.

But it is evident that there is a quality which helps us negotiate life. *Humor*. The longer I live the more I appreciate the importance of humor. By humor, I don't mean the ability to tell a joke or be funny. I mean our capacity for playfulness, for appreciating the ironies of life, the ability to not take ourselves and our situations so seriously that we are unable to respond creatively and joyfully when life is difficult.

I learned something neat this week. I was doing a study on the word *humor* and discovered it dates back to the 14th Century Latin word *humēre* (**ooh**-may-ru), which means *to moisten*. I was telling this to Joan, I try out all my ideas on her first, and I mentioned the relationship between the words *humor* and *moisten*. She said, "Of course they're related. Humor and water make things viable. You need them to live." As soon as she said that, I had an image of dry, cracked earth, Dustbowl earth, where no water has fallen, and then it receives rain, it moistens, and what happens? All of a sudden, there's life. The fractured earth heals, and it can sustain life again. I thought, "That's what humor does!" Our lives are fractured, our spirits are broken, and humor, playfulness, and an appreciation for life's absurdities, help heal our hearts. All of a sudden, there's life again. Perhaps this is what Jesus meant when he told his disciples, "In the world you will have trouble, but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world." Maybe he knew the importance of good cheer.

Quite a number of years ago, a young man and woman in the meeting I was pastoring fell in love and were married. They were a really neat couple—bright and fun and engaging. A year passed. Then one Sunday they stood during meeting and announced they were expecting their first child. Everyone cheered. A few weeks later, she went to the doctor and had a routine blood test done and it was discovered she had an aggressive form of leukemia. She and her husband stood the next Sunday and talked it about it during worship and we were all just devastated.

The doctors urged her to terminate her pregnancy and begin treatment for the leukemia immediately, but she decided she would have their baby first, then get treatment. The chances for recovery were slim either way and she didn't want the leukemia to claim two lives. She had their baby, a handsome baby boy, and she began treatment. I'd go see her in the afternoon at the hospital and sit with her and her husband. She lost her hair and said, "Just think of the money I'm saving on haircuts." All through her treatment, she had the most tremendous spirit. Buoying others up. Laughing. Celebrating the good in her life, even when everything seemed so bad. Never a word of self-pity. The irony was that before her illness, she was introverted and serious, but when her life began breaking apart, she responded with tremendous grace and humor, reaching out to others.

In her final weeks, there was a buoyancy to her life. Now it didn't change her outcome. She passed away. But before she died she made an unbearable situation bearable for those she loved. It was as if life was cracked and broken all around her, like dry earth, and she took her family and friends by the hand and with humor and good cheer walked them through that valley of death.

You find yourself in these painful, difficult situations and you realize the only way you're going to make it through is with good cheer. The droughts hit and the landscape of our lives is fractured. Happens to us all, sooner or later. But Jesus says, "Be of good cheer. I have overcome the world." Be of good cheer. Your land might be parched, but the rain will fall, and life will spring up once again.

When my buddy Tom Mullen passed away this summer, his pastor concluded Tom's memorial service by reading something Tom himself had written years before. "When we die, it's best to let our lives speak for themselves. If we are fortunate enough to be part of a faith community, words of resurrection and hope can be embraced and claimed. We can laugh together and weep together because the joke is ultimately on the Grim Reaper. That's why he's so grim." That's humor. The awareness that life took its best swing at us, but we're still standing, and we can still laugh.