

What Does Whelmed Look Like?
Rev. Carol Allman-Morton
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UUMSB

Readings:

Tao te Ching, Chapter 11 – Stephen Mitchell translation

We join spokes together in a wheel,
but it is the center hole
that makes the wagon move.

We shape clay into a pot,
but it is the emptiness inside
that holds whatever we want.

We hammer wood for a house,
but it is the inner space
that makes it livable.

We work with being,
but non-being is what we use.

"This Making of a Whole Self" by Nancy Shaffer. Published in *Instructions in Joy: Meditations* (Skinner House Books, 2002).

This making of a whole self takes
such a very long time: pieces are not
sequential nor our supplies. We work here,
then there, hold up tattered fabric to the light.
Sew past dark, intent. Use all our thread.

Sleeves may come before length;
buttons, before a rounded neck.
We sew at what most needs us,
and as it asks, sew again.

The self is not one thing, once made,
unaltered. Not midnight task alone, not
after other work. It's everything we come
upon, make ours: all this fitting of
what-once-was and has-become.

Sermon:

My dad has a playful expression that he uses, "too much enough." He uses it especially when working on projects. Like if you sink a screw too far into a two by four, it's too much

enough, or if you were cooking something and it came out charred - too much enough. In his lexicon, it is when you are trying to hit the sweet spot, and with all good intentions, just miss and go too far. When I picked the title of this sermon, “What Does Whelmed Look Like” I was trying to make a funny play on words to talk about finding calm and center. Jokes on me though, whelmed is a word, and it means about same thing as overwhelmed - to turn over or upside down. So sometime in 15th century England, folks started using overwhelm, as emphasis, not only overturned and sunk, but ruined. My word play was too much enough.

What does it mean to find a path, a middle way, where we don't ignore pain, suffering, and troubles, but are able to hold life loosely enough to feel centered and move forward? What does that look like? Throughout the last year, and especially in the last couple of weeks, I have been plugged into the news all throughout the day. This week, I have been reading essays and analysis about the future of our society. Being informed is important, and reading and hearing the thoughts of others can help us to shape our own, heck, that is what we are engaging in right now, but it can also start my head buzzing. When I was younger, even if it was a stressful time, I could always sleep. Now, I sometimes get up in the middle of the night and work, or read. If I get up with the dog at 5:30 to go outside, the dog hops back up on the bed and goes back to sleep, but most days, I am up.

When I am stuck in a feeling overwhelm, I like to play a game with myself, what advice would I give to a friend going through this? I would probably say things like, “reading one more Bill Moyers essay is not going to be the thing that makes you feel safe and solves the world's problems,” or “have you been meditating or using any of your spiritual practices?” And I would answer, “Well of course I haven't! Because my brain has been panicking!” Then I would look at myself sternly. Stress and overwhelm have their place as catalysts and calls to action, but we can't live there all the time, or our bodies will start to break down. The Sage writes in the Tao te Ching:

We join spokes together in a wheel,
but it is the center hole
that makes the wagon move.

We shape clay into a pot,
but it is the emptiness inside
that holds whatever we want.

We hammer wood for a house,
but it is the inner space
that makes it livable.

We work with being,
but non-being is what we use. ¹

Some of us gathered here I know are very attentive to daily practices that help them to be centered, thoughtful, and compassionate people, but if you are more like me and need a metaphorical “snap out of it” every once and a while, here is what I do: I start listing things that I am grateful for, without any kind of narrative or threads to deeper meaning. Yesterday I looked around my environment and thought: I am grateful for our woodpile and for Tadd stacking it. I

1 Tao te Ching, Chapter 11 – Stephen Mitchell translation

am grateful for the furry creatures in our house that let me scratch their bellies, I am grateful for the view of the trees in my backyard. I am grateful for Will Farrell movies. Once I have stopped the thinking merry-go-round, and am moving back toward my center, I can be more thoughtful, more open and engaged, but I start with what is in front of me and don't expect it to be perfect.

Has anyone in this room felt overwhelmed recently? I invite us all to look around the room, or close your eyes, take a deep breath, and what are the first three things that come to mind that you are grateful for? Remember, they don't have to be thoughtful, poetic or perfect. Name some things you are grateful for in this moment and breathe. As you are comfortable, maybe turn to your neighbor and share the silliest of the things you are grateful for with them. No judgment. [sharing]

Okay, let's breathe a little more. What are three more things that you are grateful for? And as you are comfortable, of these three, share with a neighbor, what is the most meaningful of them for you? [sharing]

Bad, hard, and terrible things can happen at any time, systematic injustice chugs away around us at all times, and we all, especially those among us who are on the front lines of justice work, need release. We need an escape valve or we will pop. What is your interrupter? What is your release? Leonard Cohen, the spiritual singer and poet who lived as monk for years, is quoted in his biography:

"This world is full of conflicts and full of things that cannot be reconciled," Cohen has said, "but there are moments when we can transcend the dualistic system and reconcile and embrace the whole mess, and that's what I mean by 'Hallelujah.' That regardless of what the impossibility of the situation is, there is a moment when you open your mouth and you throw open your arms and you embrace the thing and you just say, 'Hallelujah! Blessed is the name.'...²

Many religious traditions offer particular prayers of gratitude, ways of connecting with the holy, and practices for helping people when they are struggling with overwhelm. There spiritual practices from meditation and silent prayer, to the rosary and labyrinth, to confession, singing, ritual, worship, recitation, and on and on. In our tradition, we have a variety of spiritual tools available to each of us as well, many of these same practices are common, but because of the individualistic identity of our tradition, it can be easier to do none of them, especially when we need the help. It is easy when feeling overwhelmed, to keep one's head down and try and plow through, rather than using any number of spiritual tools that can help manage that feeling of overwhelm. We can forget in our struggle to get things done, and do the right thing that, "We hammer wood for a house, but it is the inner space, that makes it livable." It is up to us to help ourselves, and each other, to remember as Nancy Shaffer wrote:

The self is not one thing, once made,
unaltered. Not midnight task alone, not
after other work. It's everything we come
upon, make ours: all this fitting of
what-once-was and has-become.³

Nancy also wrote:

2 <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/news/exclusive-book-excerpt-leonard-cohen-writes-hallelujah-in-the-holy-or-the-broken-20121203>

3 "This Making of a Whole Self" by Nancy Shaffer. *Instructions in Joy: Meditations* (Skinner House Books, 2002).

It isn't love that makes the world go round
but compassion — starting over in gentleness
when love hasn't been enough or other factors have failed:
a gentle refusal to blame oneself or others
and just begin again.⁴

When we feel overwhelmed we can feel isolated, and stuck. At this time of year, when we are likely to be seeing friends, family, and families of choice, we have an opportunity to really reflect on gratitude for the network of relationships that sustain us, and that help us to sustain others. *And yet*, there will be lots of pressure on our relationships. We might get stressed out over travel, chores, old disagreements or hurts. We might more strongly miss those who have passed away. We might feel the pinch of broken relationships in our hearts, or holes that have not healed. We might be lonely, or afraid about unknowns in our future. With these kinds of stressors, it could be easy to lose our moorings, become ungrounded, and lose our attention and intention. When we feel ourselves adrift, we can come back to gratitude and be centered again. There is no perfect way of moving through life, with balance, equanimity, and perfect mindfulness, no imaginary land where life does not throw us curve balls, and grief, and knock us down sometimes. Depending on our privilege, we have different tools, safety nets, and experience, but we are all human, we will all experience suffering and joy. Gratitude can help us to remember how connected we truly are, and help give us the strength we need to move forward when we are stuck.

So may it be.
Amen.

4 Nancy Shaffer, *While Still There Is Light: Writings From A Minister Facing Death*, 2013.