



LENT

DEVOTIONS

2023

For Lent 2023, we asked our contributors to submit creative pieces on transformation. In the following pages, you will see pictures, read poems, hear songs, and dive deeper into what transformation looks like for our community. We hope you find these personal reflections motivating and thoughtful.

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Ash Wednesday

February, 22, 2023

Dear Friends, I wanted to share with you an article written by my friend, Pastor Brian Hiortdahl of St. Luke Lutheran Church, Sacramento, CA. This article was first published in the January/February 2023 issue of Living Lutheran. Brian has been a member of the ELCA Larger Church Network and has participated in our Anchor Church movement toward congregational vitality. I pray that this article might be a blessing for you and your family as you begin your Lenten journey.

With abiding hope, Pastor Doug

A DAY TO REMEMBER
By Brian Hiortdahl

Ash Wednesday is a poignant day for many pastors. We trace the assurance of death on faces we love: old faces wrinkled with stories, newborn faces with eyes too big for tiny heads, furrowed faces sagging with worry, bright faces warm with joy, beloved faces of so many colors and contours and expressions—all of them ticketed for the grave. Maybe we baptized them. Maybe we will attend their funeral, or they ours. We look into deep, dear, lively eyes and put souls on notice: Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.

When COVID-19 reinforced this annual reminder with terrifying clarity, many pastors and faith communities got creative about Ash Wednesday. There were masks, gloves, swabs, “drive-through” ashes, home deliveries, virtual liturgies and more. How does one deliver such intimate truth from a social distance?

Even before the pandemic, I observed an uptick in both demand and creative supply on Ash Wednesday. New visitors came to worship; seasoned pastors went to storefronts and train stations with portable ashes for people too busy to die. Apparently there’s a market niche for free, unfiltered honesty.

Death, Paul wrote, is the paycheck for sin, and it arrives for us all. The church has bundled sin and death as a package deal ever since, not always helpfully. What could simply be the natural or tragic end of a precious life becomes laden with blame, guilt, shame, regret and anxiety about our eternal fate. Our desperate bargaining for answers to mitigate our grief and helplessness can muddle a holy mystery. Yet dismissing Paul’s insight into the link between death and sin is dishonest. Ash Wednesday insists that we face both.

Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.

Each is a breakage. Death breaks the connection between breath and body that constitutes life. Sin breaks the connection between us and God that constitutes eternal life, our dynamic union with God and, by extension, all God’s beloved creation. This sacred bond is not just a future hope but a present possibility. Death doesn’t begin eternal life—it transforms and deepens it. That’s the gospel of baptism, that other time when our foreheads are marked (in oil rather than ash) with the sign of Christ’s cross. “Beloved, we are God’s children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed” (1 John 3:2).

The deep promise of Ash Wednesday

What is revealed now, in the brilliant afterglow of Epiphany, is the disconnect and distance between who God is, unveiled in Jesus Christ, and how we currently are. The New Testament borrows an image from archery: we miss the mark. In English the term is translated as "sin." Like the fourth step in Alcoholics Anonymous, Ash Wednesday invites us to make "a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves." Lent will offer us a full 40 days for this daunting work. That's a lot of unfiltered honesty. We have many wayward arrows to gather.

Dust also carries the promise and power of life.

Part of the genius of this is that picking up our fallen arrows forces us to bend down. Finding them in the dust, we find ourselves. Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return. This is more than a warning; it's a promise. Don't discount dust! Look beneath the couch: dust is everywhere. Dust is the DNA of the stars and of the couple next door. Dust connects us, and reconnects us, to creation, especially the earth and its most vulnerable inhabitants, who suffer from our egocentric myopia, cruelty and neglect.

Dust also carries the promise and power of life. When we become worm food, worms are fed and life advances. That capacity to nourish life is already present in us now, before we die, and will be transformed and deepened on the other side. "If it dies it bears much fruit" (John 12:24). Remember that it was dust that God first scooped up to begin sculpting a new, unprecedented friend. Well before the introduction of death and sin, God breathed the breath of life into dusty nostrils to kindle human life. Our journey begins in God's hands.

Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return. The deep promise of Ash Wednesday is that, by way of the cross, we are all heading home. We will again be fully and truly ourselves. We will again be held in God's hands. We will again be poised to awaken to wonder and beauty, far exceeding what a handful of dust could possibly imagine. We will be born again. For now, living in this gorgeous, fractured, treasured world, Ash Wednesday invites us to remember who and whose we are: sin-scarred saints; wounded, wayward and wondrous; broken and beloved children of God. Remember that you are God's, and to God you will return.

This article originally appeared in Living Lutheran's January/February 2023 issue. Reprinted with permission. © ELCA

A Cross for My Dad
Thursday, February 23
Eden Gamelin, 8 years old



This is the cross I made for my dad. I started by taking a bunch of cardboard and was hot gluing it together. I thought that it would make a good cross so I put the sideways one on. It looked plain so I took some paint chips I had and glued those on next.

I like making art out of things I find. I make art out of sticks and wind them with yarn. I also make art out of rocks and paint them.

Art makes me feel kind of special that I can make something, and if it doesn't turn out right I try again.

(Note from dad: I thought it interesting that the colors of the two paint chips were Shady Palm and Back of Beyond. These feel like two very lenten names for colors.)

Touch Your Toes

Friday, February 24

Rebecca Burris, Director of Communications

Did you have fitness tests in gym class at school? I remember dreading that day when each student had to perform a designated fitness activity in front of the whole class. I was never athletic and being forced to do a pull up or a push up in front of the class was an absolute nightmare. I always claimed that my legs were much longer than my arms and that is why I could never touch my toes. The PE teachers never bought that excuse and still made me sit at that brown box with a ruler and reach as far as I could.... which was nowhere near my toes. The visceral response I have at performing athletic endeavors have haunted me well into adulthood.

Then came 2020. What a year. Like most people, I started working from home fulltime with both my kiddos and spouse. That year, the days stretched on and on and by the evenings I was so exhausted of being needed that I started locking myself in my office for an hour each night. I literally had no agenda for this hour except to be myself. I intuitively started stretching and trying to work out the massive amount of knots in my shoulders. I was SHOCKED when a couple of weeks into my alone time I touched my toes. I had never touched my toes in my life! Look at me now elementary school fitness test!

My alone time in 2020 soon transformed into a time when I would move my body. I had zero expectations except to move. I have continued this practice, trying to move my body each day. Movement has become a meditation for me. Yoga taught me that I could dedicate my practice or movement of the day to someone or something. This full body display of intention has radically changed how I view fitness. I do not set any fitness goals because I will probably fail and disappointment myself. Instead, I move my body for myself and for others and to focus on the gratitude of today.

Transcending Time
Saturday, February 25
Amy Corneilie, Congregation President

Vacations have been a passion of mine since 6th grade when my family traveled to Japan. While I enjoy beaches and pina coladas, it's the culture and the people that transform me.

When Dennis and I went to Amsterdam, the most impactful part of the trip was the Anne Frank House. During the 2-hour wait in line, people were talking and laughing, until they stepped foot into that house. The mood of the group was instantly solemn.

We knew the story of this 13-year-old Jewish girl who wrote about her family in hiding from the Nazis, but being in that place made it vividly real and just harrowing to embrace the cruelty capable of humanity. Transcending time, the Anne Frank House left a mark on my soul, forever changing me.



Music. Mood. Mindset.

Monday, February 27

Pastor Jay Gamelin, Lead Servant for Family Life

For those that know me, I listen to music according to whatever it is I am doing at the time. Washing dishes? I have a soundtrack for that (called Scrub a Dub). Going for a walk? You bet (Chill and Walk). Cooking dinner (Mindful Cooking), sitting on the back deck (Summer Sounds from Somewhere Else), or just driving my car through the mountains (Driving With the Top Down At Night). I love to find just the right song and feel for what I am doing at the moment.

Music has a way of changing my mood and mindset. What I listen to shapes my perspective of what I am doing at the time, transforming the mundane into a moment. It helps me appreciate whatever activity is set before me. It also helps me focus my energy. When I walk listening to music, the colors are brighter, the smells richer, things are more alive.

What is your soundtrack or playlist this Lent? Who are you listening to that focuses your heart and attention on the still small voice of God that may be swimming in your music? Consider using moments of your life to fill with the contemplative work of simply listening by picking that playlist, album, or soundtrack that focuses your heart on the divine voice.

Looking for a suggestion? Here is a Spotify playlist of music I am listening to this Lent (go to <https://spoti.fi/410eaFe> or scan the QR code below with your phone camera). The first part of this list are songs by Alt. Christian artists. The second half are instrumental songs I use for meditation or simply quieting my soul. May you find the melody of God in your Lenten Journey.



Scan for Lent music playlist!

Underdog

Tuesday, February 28

Matt Burris

Are you a fan of underdog stories? I love a good underdog story! I love rooting for the average Joe who makes it in an unlikely situation. I think these stories are so loved because we can relate to it. At one time or another, we have felt like the odds for us to succeed were unlikely. Underdog stories are stories of transformation.

This is cheesy to admit, but I like to pretend that I am the underdog in situations. I use this image of being at the back of the pack to push myself through moments when I feel like giving up. I use it in all areas of my life from riding in a pro motocross race when I was 36, to eating kale....dry, to trying to outlast the Xfinity customer representative by staying on the phone longer. For the most part these tasks are excruciating but if I play the Rocky theme song and start jogging the stairs in my sweats, I get myself motivated to succeed.

Sure, my wife might call me "overly competitive," but I think this idea of constantly trying to transform and progress in life helps me motivate and push through the moments when I feel like giving up. So your task for today is to find that song that motivates you and to blare it with uninhibited recklessness while you try to eat dry kale. *Thank you, Lord, for joy, humor, and the ability to progress. And bacon. Amen.*



Reinventing Self: A Transformational Journey

Wednesday, March 1

Glenn Hecox, Lead Servant for Digital Arts

...to put away your former way of life, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God... (Ephesians 4:22-24)

A moment of transformation. Perhaps you've experienced one of those - maybe even several. Or maybe you're like me and struggle to clearly identify a single transformational moment in your life journey. That's not to say I have not experienced periods of growth and change. I've had plenty of those. And there have certainly been times I've had to make the kind of major decisions that changed the direction from where I thought my life might go, though I'm not sure I would consider those moments of transformation.

Conversely, I have no problem in identifying periods of time when I experienced a reinvention of self, which, upon further examination, may or may not have included a moment of transformation. Richard Rohr states that transformation more often happens not when something new begins but when something old falls apart. The pain of something old falling apart invites and sometimes forces the soul to go to a new place because the old place is falling apart. In my experience, perhaps my soul didn't "engage" the process because I didn't experience the feeling of the old falling apart. Instead, my mind engaged and implemented a plan in an effort to grow towards something new before I would experience the pain of the old.

My journey at Abiding Hope has been a blessing - one filled with great opportunity as well as change, reinvention, and possibly even that elusive transformational moment. In my 29 years, I've seen my role and identity evolve quite a bit, and with each transition came the necessity for personal reinvention. The evolution process wasn't simply the change in titles, it was the embracing of new calls, each with a new vision and purpose. As I reflect on each of these experiences, I notice they all have three things in common: (1) Reinventing one's self is hard work, (2) reinvention requires disciplined thought and action, and (3) reinvention relies on trust in God and the willingness to follow the Spirit.

I'm not one who believes we can make transformation happen, but I do believe we can make choices that help open ourselves up to the Spirit, to hearing where it is that God is leading us. The work of reinvention not only charts a new course for our life journey, but it can also nurture the soul for the sake of the Spirit. In my experience, the process of reinvention is one way we can be proactive in engaging the work of the Spirit. So if you find yourself in a season of life in which you are questioning where God might be leading, might I encourage you to embark on a journey of reinvention and be open to all it may bring.

A Pilgrimage

Thursday, March 2

Marilyn Watson



One's individual journey through life,
As in Pilgrim's Progress.
One's general description of personal growth.
A pathway for a particular spiritual focus.
A walk to a shrine or relic, to seek "THE" answer.



My journey was the Camino de Santiago in Spain.
Over 100 miles hiking, walking, meditating
Exploring another culture,
Speaking another language (halfway, at least)



Finding a new favorite wine, Vinho Verde
the New Wine.

Smooth roads,
The Roman Way.
Large cobblestones,



A dirt path in a forest of ferns.



Raindrops, a drizzle, never a downpour
The sun, sunblock and sweat
Laughter and stores.



A reflection of sins and transgressions,
A two-day affair, repeating,
"As far as the east is from the west, your sins are forgiven"
Flinging hands left, then right, for hours as I walked.
A review of blessings and gifts.
Then, the BIG question.

"What now, O Lord,
What do I do with the remaining years in my life,
How do I serve you?"

Silence-step, step, step
Silence-step, step
More silence. More steps,

Suddenly, like a tiny seed that blossoms into a flower
"Love me,
Serve me."

4, 889 miles,
100-mile walk,
10 days of searching,
\$5000.00 dollars



And the answer was in front of my face,
All along.
Right here,
Right now.
Every. Single.Sunday

Love God, Serve God
Love all, Serve all.

Gratitude in an App

Friday, March 3

Stephanie Harper, Asst. to the Lead Pastor

I have never been much for journaling. This might surprise those of you who know that I write and edit professionally. I kept a diary throughout high school and my freshman year in college and then it felt like something that I just sort of grew out of. It began to feel more like a chore than something I benefited from. I didn't like taking the time to write down my thoughts and feelings about the day when I was on deadline for other work. I started using notebooks for poetry, for meetings, and other professional endeavors. It just lost its luster in a way. Now, because I have a chronic neurological disease, writing by hand is actually physically painful.

I noticed several months ago that I was in a funk that I just couldn't get out of. There was a lot of change happening in the normally stable aspects of my life and I was feeling shaken and uneasy. I was anxious and more negative than usual about my health and my life situation and just about everything else I could possibly worry about. I knew I needed to do something.

And the thought of journaling once again crossed my mind. What if I just wrote down a few things I was thankful for every night before bed? But then, what if I didn't feel good? Or what if my hands were particularly sore? And how would I pick which of my rather large collection of blank notebooks I would dedicate to this project? That's when I am across the Grateful App (search for "Grateful: A Gratitude Journal" in your phone's app store).

It's a very cool, very easily downloadable gratitude journal you can use on your phone. It provides a selection of prompts, which can be very helpful on days when you struggle to know what you're feeling grateful for. You can also add notes, photos, and even tag posts so you can organize and look through them later. It was exactly what I needed. Since I downloaded it and began using it on July 3rd of 2022, I have not missed a single day.

And I feel better overall. Not in any life-changing sort of way. But I am more aware of myself and my life and I am intentional about being on the lookout for those nuggets of gratitude I will add to my app each night. Now contrary to how this may sound, this is not an advertisement for a specific app, and I am not a paid sponsor. I really just wanted to say that however you do it, find a way to orient yourself in the direction of gratitude, those large and small happenings on a daily basis, to remind you of the good things in our lives and in our world.

If you need an exercise to start with, I'm particularly fond of this one as a way to open the door a little wider towards self-awareness:

"I Am" Poem

I am (a special characteristic you have)

I wonder (something you are actually curious about)

I hear (a sound you can hear)

I see (something you can see)

I want (an actual desire)

I am (the first line of the poem repeated).

I pretend (something you actually pretend to do)

I feel (a feeling you are having or have had recently)

I worry (something that makes you concerned or bothers you)

I cry (something that makes you very sad)

I am (the first line of the poem repeated).
I understand (something you know is true)
I say (something you believe in)
I dream (something you actually dream about)
I try (something you really make an effort about)
I hope (something you actually hope for)
I am (the first line of the poem repeated)

The Power of Invitation

Saturday, March 4

Natalie Payant

I should no longer be surprised by the power of a simple invitation. Some of my most treasured relationships began when I made a point to extend an “ask” to someone else or with someone reaching out to me. After inviting a high school teammate to join us on a weekend trip to watch my brother’s basketball tournament, our time spent laughing and cheering on the boys’ team grew into a lifelong friendship that now stretches across states and busy, changing lives. When I was approached by a soccer coach at a college kick-off tournament to come explore the school and meet the team, I could not have expected that conversation would precede me choosing to attend that teaching university and realizing my dream of working in education. And a chance meeting in a child development class led me to offer to share notes with a certain someone who would eventually become my husband!



Beginning last summer, when we decided as a family to invite an exchange student to live with us for a semester, I knew this time would have a profound impact on us all and that we would grow tremendously through the experience. I was excited about sharing our cultures, foods, and traditions. I was happy we were going to allow Antonia (Toni) to realize her dream of attending school in America and knew we were going to learn just as much from her as she would from us through this exchange. I was confident she would go home with a newfound love of dogs after spending time with ours and never having pets of her own. I also thought she would be in awe of the beauty of our state and would enjoy the growing list of places and things we wanted to introduce her to while she was here.

What I did not anticipate was how quickly Abiding Hope would become involved in so many of her early memories and experiences. In her application, Toni had expressed that she thought she would attend church with her host family every once in a while. We got the impression that she attended church at home but it was not something she was super intent on continuing during her time in America, or at least that it would not be a make or break deal in being placed with a family. We did not have any expectations around how she would participate in church and planned to invite Toni to come along, or not, when we served at and attended worship.

Shortly after she arrived, we were preparing for Christmas Eve services. Our three daughters would be singing and, in my role helping the worship leaders schedule acolytes, I had not yet been able to sign anyone up to serve at our evening service. I volunteered to assist with

Communion and then wondered if Toni would be interested in serving with me--Nathan is our designated photographer/videographer, so he would be busy documenting the girls' special music.

Carrying the other basket seemed to be something I could easily explain as we were just getting used to communicating with each other, and Toni would simply follow the wine server opposite of me. She hesitantly agreed, just a little nervous about knowing exactly what to do. We were also asked to help with the candle lighting tasks, so I quickly walked Toni through the whole service as an acolyte. After we exited the church following the final procession, I congratulated Toni on doing such a great job of remembering everything I had explained to her in our crash course earlier. She responded, "Yes! That was great! I have never done anything like that before, even at my own church. Not just anyone can do those things at home." Her comment caused me to pause and reflect on a question she had frequently started asking any time we were explaining things about America, "Is this typical?"

In this situation I would have said, "No!" It is not typical for people to be invited to participate fully in all parts of a church's worship service. But it is an operating practice at Abiding Hope. It is not typical for a church community to celebrate the gifts of each person and to invest in allowing the youth to be an integral part of worship. But you will witness this at Abiding Hope, always.

Over the past two months, Toni has attended worship with us and enjoyed becoming a part of the youth group meetings after the services. When the All In spring retreat was scheduled, we asked her if she would like to attend with our oldest daughter, Faythe, and meet more high school students from all around Colorado. Toni quickly decided she would and then expressed that this would be another "first type" experience for her; she has never been on a retreat with other students. At home, that is something that is reserved for a senior trip after high school graduation. In Austria, they do not have after school or church youth groups/clubs, so she would not have had this opportunity for another year or two.

There are so many amazing things about the church that I do, in some ways, take for granted and have to stop and step back to appreciate how truly special they are. Abiding Hope is constantly inviting us to connect, to worship, to serve, to give gratitude, to allow a space for grief and sadness, to lift up others, and to choose love and hope. Allowing Toni to be invited into this community while she is here gives me such joy knowing that it is a place she truly feels welcome to experience new things and grow in a different way.

Our family initially began attending the church after our wonderful neighbors, the Allingtons, invited us to watch their kids performing in a Passion service years ago. We have since invited many other friends to come and experience worship, including Toni. I know there are more people who deserve a chance to be reminded they are a Child of God, they are loved, they are enough, and they can come as they are.

In this lenten season, I am encouraged to extend those invitations--and not just to church. We need to invite people to dinner, make plans to play and have fun on purpose with others, to ask those around us to walk alongside us and share in our laughter and tears, and take time to connect with both old and new friends. For we are not meant to do life alone.

"Let us think of ways to motivate one another to acts of love and good works. And let us not neglect our meeting together, as some people do, but encourage one another, especially now that the day of his return is drawing near." ~Hebrews 10:24-25, NLT

The Sun Always Rises

Monday, March 6

Anne Harper

To the Morning, by Dan Fogelberg

*Watching the sun
Watching it come
Watching it come up over the rooftops*

*Cloudy and warm
Maybe a storm
You can never quite tell
From the morning*

*And it's going to be a day
There is really no way to say no
To the morning*

*Yes it's going to be a day
There is really nothing left to
Say but
Come on morning*

I have been thinking a lot about sadness lately; emotional pain, physical pain, and that incredibly dark sadness that comes when things happen in and around our lives that can't be explained, but that cut us to our very core. Sometimes the darkness is so deep and dark that we think it will never go away. But as God's people, we know that there is light, and that love and life always win. Sometimes it is hard to remember that, and we need reminders to help us transform our darkness and pain.

I was scrolling through Facebook a few nights ago, and a video popped up in my feed that was one of my absolute favorite Dan Fogelberg songs, To the Morning. Dan wrote this song very early in his career and it is about waking up every day and knowing that it's going to be a new day, regardless of anything else, no matter what happens in life. This song always makes me smile. It reminds me of one of God's greatest examples of transformation. That darkness turns to light, night always turns into day. The sun always rises. No matter how great your pain and sadness are, there is always a new day to spread sunshine and light. Your darkness might take a bit longer to transform than someone else's, but it will transform. The sun always rises!

You can listen to the complete song here:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cLaOArTts4M>

OR open the camera on your phone and scan the QR code



My Little Baby Bird
Tuesday, March 7
Grace E. Gnagey, 8 years old



Hi my name is Grace and I want to show you my little baby bird. I decided to make a baby bird because the word "transformation" reminds me of something growing. The baby bird just hatched out of its egg and is in its nest. Baby birds are a sign of life.

Serving the Lord

Wednesday, March 8

Marjorie Laird

I attended Sunday School and church most every Sunday from a small child to an adult. Grace was a consistent message, and I was taught to **serve the Lord**. For years I thought that meant being good and going to church regularly. Yes, there were times in my young adult years that I considered going into ministry or applying to be a missionary. Of course, at that time – being a woman greatly limited my opportunities to serve in some sort of leadership capacity. Years passed and I was confident that God wanted me working in the field of counseling/psychology. Still, the question of **serving the Lord** continued to get my attention. Attending church once a week was becoming less and less satisfactory to me. I enjoyed going to church. It helped to remind me of spiritual truths. It was always enjoyable to see and visit with friends. Still, something was missing.

Joining the AH community brought a new approach and understanding to the meaning of service. I remember when I first heard Pastor Doug say, “Be the heart, hands, and feet of Jesus.” That sounded beautiful, but I quickly began to question how challenging that would be. How could I (or anyone else for that matter) be the heart, hands, and feet of Jesus? As the weeks passed, his sermons helped me to understand that this meant to love and care wherever I might be (home, neighborhood, work, school). I remember praying...*Help me, dear Lord, to see the world as though I were looking through your eyes.* I had as my primary goal in life: to be present... to see needs...to love and to care.

This was without question an amazing new view of living and **serving the Lord**. There was, however, more to learn. I recognized that often my desire to be the heart, hands, and feet of Jesus was interrupted by self-criticism, doubt, or fear of failure. On a Sunday when I was assisting and leading in the prayers, one of the prayers given to me to read was this: *God of love, today we confess that our fear of not being enough can paralyze us.* I was reading this to the congregation, but God was speaking to me.

For my step in spiritual growth, I needed to understand and accept God’s love for me and God’s plan for me to represent God wherever I went in life. I added to my prayers... *Help me, dear Lord, to see me as though I were looking through your eyes. Serving the Lord became so much more natural.* What once seemed almost like a mystery relaxed into seeing myself through the eyes of God and sharing that love with others.

Help me, dear Lord, to see **me** as though I were looking
through your eyes
Loving, caring, forgiving – only your grace supplies.
Accepting my imperfections – the big ones and the small
Through my successes and my failures
Standing straight and tall.
Help me, dear Lord, to see me as though I were looking
Through your eyes
Then I can share with others the love you’ve shown to me
And they, in turn, can use **YOUR** eyes to look and love and see.

Physically Transforming
Thursday, March 9
Dakota Harper
(Interviewed by Stephanie Harper)



Why is weight lifting important to you?

Weight-lifting is important to me because the dedication and hard work that I put into maintaining a steady routine helps me with real life in that it has taught me how to apply focus and discipline to other aspects of my life. It's also a form of therapy. When I am in the weight room with my headphones on and music blaring, it's a way for me to both zone out and de-stress. I believe that, for me, weight lifting is actually my form of meditation. I also feel like each and every day that I go to the gym to work out, it makes me a better person than I was the day before.

How has the physical transformation you've experienced through weight-lifting also been spiritual?

The physical transformation is just a byproduct of my goals. My main goal with training is that meditative aspect, which has become an essential part of connecting with myself. I also want the work I put in at the gym to carry me through my work as a Firefighter and EMT. I also feel like putting myself through the experience of pushing my body to its limits has allowed me to connect to people in crisis and have empathy and understand that life is hard. Those moments have made me a better EMT and Firefighter.

Think Before You Speak

Friday, March 10

Cindy Johnson

The words of the reckless pierce like swords, but the tongue of the wise brings healing. Proverbs 12:18

I was honored and blessed eighteen months ago when I accepted a job offer at CRAIG Rehabilitation Hospital in their Outpatient Services department. This division of CRAIG serves and provides ongoing therapies and intense evaluations for our former CRAIG inpatients who are living with Spinal Cord Injuries or Traumatic Brain Injuries.

I am further privileged to be part of weekly meetings with the Medical Director of Outpatient Services, the Assistant Chief Nurse Officer, and the clinical teams that treat our patients. In our conference room where we meet, I noticed a sign on the wall about a month after starting in my new position. I was very moved by the simplicity of it and took a picture so I could have with me to apply in all aspects of my life. It made me reflect deeper on how our words and what we say to others or even to ourselves has such a lasting impact.

The words we speak can create love, inspiration, joy, compassion, forgiveness, acceptance and respect both in ourselves and others. They can connect us to one another in significant ways. The words we also speak can create deep pain, fear, humiliation, anxiety, hostility, disrespect or a feeling of worthlessness in others or within ourselves as well. The power of words and how we use them is enormous. It is said that 96% of communication is non-verbal. Maybe. But verbal words have the ability to fundamentally change who we are and our relationships with one another for better or for worse. I continue to be a work in progress for sure, but this simple sign has helped me to be more aware and intentional about how I speak in all parts of my life.



it

Broken Transformation

Saturday, March 11

Pastor Julie McNitt, Lead Servant for Spiritual Life



Experience has taught me that transformation comes just as often from breaking as from blooming. This painting, which hangs in my office at Abiding Hope, depicts the earthquake that occurred in Haiti on January 12, 2010. It is an image of destruction and terror, but it is also a reminder to me that God can and will transform our darkest days. It is a reminder that even in times of heartbreak and loss, life and love really do win.

The Boy
Monday, March 13
Abel Gamelin

There is a boy here next to me
Out here on this great dry sea
He stares at me, dark soulful eyes
Carving a hole in my soul
"Will you take me with you?"
He asks
I stare across the flat expanse
So wide, so long, so harsh.
Who could think to go alone?
I close my heart
Encase it within stone
"No."
I say with finality...
I set out, leaving him behind
Days I walk, I crawl, I limp
Some days I cry
Some days I stare
Lope listlessly
No cares
No loves
Empty
The hole in my soul a hole in me
I can still see him, that boy of the golden curls
He grows fainter with each step, always just within reach
Though slipping away all the while
One day I give up.
The sun glares down on me

In this great endless waste

I stop.

He is fainter now than ever before as I decide to throw it all away

I fade myself now

Still those deep brown eyes burrow into me

The gap in my soul a great, gaping maw

Swallowing me

I am in the dark

I'm scared I don't want to go

As I am almost gone, a small, chubby hand reaches out

Tiny, soft, with the love and promise of one new to life's beautiful gift

Those brown eyes chip away the hardness of my heart

I break

I weep

But he grows stronger,

The man I am now knows the boy I was.

And as that little man whose mother kissed him to sleep

And whose father laughed as he hid under the covers

Takes my hand and leads me

I see him now with that sweet smile

And as we find the path together through this great wide plain

He asks again "Will you take me with you?"

I pause

Tears in my eyes, yet the faintest glimmers of that old sweet smile still on my face

The deep well in my soul still there, yet softer and smaller

"Yes."

I say with finality.

And we go together into the great wide world.

God's Reign in Chihuly

Tuesday, March 14

Stephanie Harper



I took this photo of one of the many amazing hand-blown glass sculptures at Dale Chihuly's studio and museum in Seattle, Washington in 2016. Dale Chihuly has always been a favorite artist of mine and I was completely overwhelmed by the vibrancy of so many of his pieces in one place. It was a magical day for me.

As I pondered over his many pieces, I kept coming back to this one. It would be easy to think it's just a bunch of colorful glass piled together in something that resembles a sort of boat or raft of some kind. But I saw more. I saw unique shapes, sizes, and colors meticulously placed in specific places to create a whole image. Now, I can't tell you why Chihuly chose to put the green speckled orb in one place, and the bluebell looking pieces in others. I wouldn't dream of dissecting the sculpture in that way.

What I can tell you is that when I look at this particular Chihuly sculpture, I think I see a glimpse of what the reign of God is meant to be. I see beauty and color, diverse shapes and sizes. I see representations of humans and nature intertwined in peace and unity. Every piece is part of the whole of the design. Every piece belongs. Each colorful figure only adds to the overall harmony. That's why it was so hard for me to look away that day, and every time I revisit my photos. To me, this sculpture represents our creator God who never stops transforming us all, individually and collectively, into something new and beautiful.

The Best Ever Retreat

Wednesday, March 15

Susie Gamelin

I can hardly wait to tell you about the best retreat I've ever been on. It was last Fall. Why was it outstanding? There are so many reasons.

One of those reasons for the Best Ever Retreat is that I didn't have to travel to get there. No long, boring car trip. No crowded and unpredictable plane ride. No hour long school bus ride on dirt roads. There's another reason why this retreat was great. The accommodations were excellent. Not like the weeklong retreat I had at a camp that had once been a mining camp where we slept on, um, 70 year old miners' cots. Could those mattresses have been 70 years old, too? The communal bathrooms in many retreat sites are far away in the middle of the night. But my retreat site last fall was bright and cozy, with a to-die-for mattress and a private bath.

Are you ready for another reason why this recent retreat was amazing? I didn't have to leave until I decided I could. No counting down days, packing what seemed like minutes after unpacking, or lamenting that I didn't have time to do all I wanted to. My retreat lasted a satisfying nine weeks. Another reason I loved this time was because I got to do whatever I wanted. Reading book after book. Streaming West Wing through six, 25 episode seasons. (Will President Bartlett be able to function with his MS? How many national emergencies can there be in one day?) I was able to pray throughout the day and night, listening to and talking with God. I hope that you felt those prayers. You were on the list. I even resumed work that I love, studying scripture and reviewing other writers' manuscripts for our national church's publishing house.

Are you jealous? I guess it's time that I tell you about a few, less alluring aspects of my retreat. Like the fact that it began with a nasty fall which resulted in three pelvic fractures. I had to lie flat on my back for five weeks. During that time, I had to convince myself to get out of bed once every hour to help my healing and to ward off pesky blood clots. Here's a sample of the conversation in my head once every hour: "Get up, you can do it, yes, you can, now, just sit up, really, it's going to be alright, just move now, GET UP!" Pain? You bet. Pain meds were vital but made me uneasy.

When a friend suggested in the first few days of my reduced circumstances that I wasn't a prisoner in my bedroom, but was on retreat, everything fell into place. (Oops, unintended pun.) I was transformed. I wasn't a poor, suffering patient. I had stepped aside into another world. I thought of Jesus retreating time after time to be by himself and talk with God. God was always on retreat with me, from the dark night I threw myself down on a sidewalk, to my return to Abiding Hope on a brilliant Christmas Eve afternoon. I never felt alone. I was never scared. God's peace surrounded me. Then God sent angels. Over and over again. In many forms. At many different times. For a variety of reasons. A lot of them looked like Pastor Jay.

When I ask myself what insights I had as a result of my retreat experience, I want to tell you that I marvel at my body's ability to heal. Resilience, not just recovery, became a good friend. It is one of God's great gifts. Another gift, patience, grew the more I used it. How I treasured the time I had to pray. I prayed especially for the people who don't know deep down in their bones that all means all. Now that I am 95% recovered, I am eager to reach more out to those folks. We are all God's children. Everyone's different and everyone belongs.

There are a multitude of benefits from my nine week retreat. There is just one exception: the food, and trying to eat it lying flat on my back. Drinking coffee was a particularly messy experience. In spite of this one dismal memory, the basket of benefits overflows.

My retreat was transformational. I am deeply and profoundly grateful for it. Thanks for listening.

Memorial Rocks

Thursday, March 16
Daidre Hunter

I had retired a couple of years ago, and knew that I was going to try to be doing more volunteering at church. Little did I know that I would be asked if I was willing to take on the responsibility of organizing the funeral receptions at our church. Carol Hjerlied had been previously organizing them for about 25 years, but was no longer able to continue in that capacity. Carol did tell me that she really enjoyed being able to do this for the families for all those years. She found it very gratifying.

I decided to step up to the challenge.

I have to agree that being in community with so many great folks who willingly say “yes” to help in the purchasing of food, preparation, serving, and clean-up is very uplifting for me. Also, the appreciation expressed by the families and guests makes it all worthwhile. But... I still had this urge to try to add a little special touch of my own to leave with the family.

The moment I realized that something I have been doing as a hobby for years might be able to bring some joy to the families who have just lost a loved one, I decided to use my love of stained glass to transform a plain, old rock into a mosaic memorial rock to give those families at the reception.

Here are some examples of the gifts I have made for families:



Blessing of Courage

Friday, March 17

Pastor Julie McNitt, Lead Servant of Spiritual Life

Transformation takes courage. The courage to let go of old ways of being. The courage to begin again. And again. And sometimes again. The courage to embrace a new and different future. During this season of Lent may we each be blessed with the courage that we need to face, embrace, or endure transformation.

BLESSING OF COURAGE

I cannot say
where it lives,
only that it comes
to the heart
that is open,
to the heart
that asks,
to the heart
that does not turn away.
It can take practice,
days of tugging at
what keeps us bound,
seasons of pushing against
what keeps our dreaming
small.
When it arrives,
it might surprise you
by how quiet it is,
how it moves
with such grace
for possessing
such power.
But you will know it
by the strength
that rises from within you
to meet it,
by the release
of the knot
in the center of
your chest
that suddenly lets go.
You will recognize it
by how still
your fear becomes

as it loosens its grip,
perhaps never quite
leaving you,
but calmly turning
into joy
as you enter the life
that is finally
your own.

—Jan Richardson from *The Cure for Sorrow:
A Book of Blessings for Times of Grief*

March 18
Saturday, March 18
Kim Gnagey, Lead Servant for Worship Life

March 18, 2010

Dear Neal,

I wish you could be here to see what a cute and funny teenager you have now. His curly red hair and long skinny body are just the right amount of awkward to give him an excellent personality. He plays the keyboard just like you did, and he has a charming half-smile that reminds me of you every time I see him. His freckles are from his mom. She misses you all the time, but she is healing. She remembers the best of you.

March 18, 2012

Sweet Baby Finn,

You are ten years old now, about to be eleven in May. I had the most massive baby shower anyone had ever been to. Your Aunty Lauren made ninety monkey cupcakes. I thought she might disown me for such a request! But she was happy to do it, because like so many others, she loved you already. Becoming a mom wasn't easy, but being your mom is a gift. Thank you for coming into the world to be with me.

March 18, 2018

Dear Alex,

As I'm writing this, I'm realizing tomorrow would be your 28th birthday. Your mom is incredible. Not only has she managed to get out of bed every day (most days) since you've been gone, she continues to run the farm on her own and praise God's goodness to anyone who will listen. I don't know that I could be so strong. I know she still misses you every day. You are remembered for your gentle kindness and your sense of adventure, and I personally always feel a pang of both grief and gratitude when I hear "Fireflies" by Owl City.

Phoenix

Monday, March 20

Faith Williams

I chose to draw the phoenix because it is a good representation of my life and the challenges that I have experienced. In many different cultures, the phoenix represents new life or can be a representation of the sun. I like to say that when I moved up to Littleton to live with my aunt and uncle, I was given a second chance and the opportunity to thrive in many ways that I wouldn't have been able to while living in Delta, CO. My family is a huge representation of new life and the sun because they gave me the chance to have a better life here in Littleton. They represent the sun because they have not given up on me, even with how difficult I can be sometimes. They were the light to my darkness especially when I needed it the most. They never give up on me and they help me strive every day to help me continue to be the person that I am today.



Life with Chronic Heart Failure

Tuesday, March 21

Thomas Nowakowski

When I was offered this opportunity to tell my story of what life is like with CHF (Chronic Heart Failure,) I was honestly a little surprised as I had declined the chance to tell it over the last two years. For those of you who do not know me or maybe know me vaguely, my name is Tom Nowakowski. I work for the church as an audio and visual arts technician almost every weekend on Sundays so I'm sure you've seen me back in the sound booth a time or two.

My story starts in mid-July of 2020. At the time, I was working for the church and then I was also working full-time for a Chevrolet dealership. My illness started as what felt like a small cold and progressively and slowly got worse. This went on for roughly a week or so. I noticed that I wasn't improving and felt I was feeling worse, so I decided to make a doctor's appointment with my general doctor. I went and saw them and they told me it was more than likely a bad cold. So I went and bought some cold medicine and vitamin C supplements so I could start feeling some relief.

After taking cold medicine and vitamin C for a few days, I started to notice that it was having very minimal effect for me. I thought to myself "wow, I'm really fighting something here. I'm sure I'll be better soon." At this time, we were now in the first few days of August, what I would come to call my "downfall month."

I began to get more and more sick as the days went by. I was starting to have trouble eating certain foods and I felt terrible. My energy levels were down. It started to become a major struggle just to get through the day. This went on for roughly a week and a half. By mid-August, I was struggling with endurance and being able to move around. I had major body aches and felt very fatigued. It was starting to be a real challenge to complete general tasks and fulfill my duties. The third week of August was the last week that I would ever work at the dealership. I remember that week being so difficult.

I talked to my folks about everything and we decided that I needed to go to the ER. So, we paid a visit to St. Anthony's where I was diagnosed with a severe case of pneumonia. The doctor told me that I should take a few days off from work and prescribed me a couple of antibiotics. The week that I was off from work, I couldn't tell if I was getting better.

Fast forward to that following Tuesday night. My legs were cramping, I still felt seriously fatigued, and overall terrible. I had developed a terrible cough and was coughing every five minutes. It was roughly 7pm at night on that Tuesday and I was watching TV with my dad. We were talking about how I was feeling and I had one huge cough and unfortunately this time, with it came some blood.

We ended up at UCHHealth Highlands Ranch. I was admitted into the ER almost instantly. The floor doctor told me that they wanted to admit me for overnight observation as they believed that my pneumonia may have moved from one lung to the other. When patient transport came to get me from the ER and take me upstairs to a hospital room, my parents left for the night to go home and told me that they would return later in the morning. Once I reached the room, the nurse that was in charge of me told me that I was in the ICU (intensive care unit.) I was taken by surprise at this news but she didn't have information as to why. She then began to attach these cuffs to my legs that would pressurize and depressurize intermittently.

Every hour the nurse would come in and check my vitals. I tried to rest through the night. I again asked my morning nurse why I was in the ICU, but she just told me that the doctor would be in shortly to talk with me. So I waited patiently. Finally the doctor came in. He looked nervous and I could sense sadness in him. He introduced himself and looked over some blood test results. He finally explained to me that my heart was failing and he was officially diagnosing me with Chronic Heart Failure and that the next three days were extremely crucial and that there was a very real chance that I could die. He kept talking but I was trying to process the fact that I could die at any moment and my heart was failing. It took me a good

five minutes or so before I had a full-blown mental breakdown with a lot of crying, swearing, cursing at God, the “why me” speech, the whole enchilada. Finally, I was able to get myself under some sense of control and called my parents and told them to get to the hospital ASAP.

The amount of sadness, pain, confusion, and uncertainty in my parents’ eyes as the doctor explained was incredible. When the doctor and the nurse left, we had an in depth conversation about what had happened and I distinctly remember telling them “it’s going to be ok.” I know they believed me even if I wasn’t sure myself. I was in the safest place with well-qualified doctors taking care of me. A fair amount of that day was an entire blur.

That night, I went into my phone and wrote down my final wishes: what I wanted to have happen with my stuff, apologies, thanks, that I wanted a private funeral, what I wanted to have happen with my body, etc. I asked my nurse for a sticky note and I wrote down my phone passcode and directions on where to go to access my notes for my parents. I asked the nurse to give the sticky note to them if I were to pass away that night. I was almost completely convinced that I was going to die. I did this for over a week.

After about two weeks, I was transferred to UCHEALTH Anschutz in Aurora. Three days before I was transferred, I experienced what is called a pulmonary embolism. Little did I know, this would be the first of three. I was talking with one of the nurses who was taking care of me and switching out IV fluids when it happened. It caused extreme difficulty and pain with breathing and I felt as if I was slowly having a knife slice open my chest. Then it disappeared without a trace. The decision was made that I needed to be transferred to UCHEALTH Anschutz where they could better take care of me.

I was finally transferred by ambulance to the Anschutz medical campus. Once I got settled in, the nurse came in and introduced herself to me and explained to me where I was and what I could expect while I was there. I was at high stroke risk as I had blood clots all throughout my legs, my lungs, and one major one in my left ventricle in my heart. So, I was on blood thinners.

One night, I experienced my first of two strokes. It was three in the morning and the nurse was checking all my vitals and movements. She reached her hands out to me and asked me to squeeze them. I was able to do so with my right arm and hand but I’d lost all movement in my left forearm, wrist, and hand. When she saw that I couldn’t do it, within one minute, patient transport and a bunch of CNAs came in and were rushing me to get a CAT scan of my chest. It turns out that a little piece of the blood clot in my chest had broken off and knocked into my brain, causing my loss of movement. It took me roughly four days to regain my entire movement. During those four days, the doctors told me that I had also experienced what they believed to have been a heart attack.

At this point, I never thought I’d ever get out of the ICU. I was fortunate that one evening, a coworker from the dealership came and visited me and brought a massive get well soon card signed by every single person in the dealership and I found out that a plant in a pot that looked like a 40s Chevrolet truck had been sent to my home as well. I still have that get well soon card in my bedroom at home to this day. Eventually, I had made enough improvement that I was released from the ICU and moved down to normal hospital level. My brother also came out from Boston and visited me. I was eventually released from the hospital, and my brother drove me home and he stayed with us for four more days before going back to Boston.

For the next month or so, every time I felt slightly off, we went to the ER and sure enough, they wanted to keep me there for at least a couple days. At one point, I experienced a second pulmonary embolism. It felt just like the first one but went by very quickly. I met so many different nurses, saw a few new doctors and saw ones I already knew, and went through countless runs of in-hospital treatment.

One of the scariest moments of my life happened one evening when I was at home. I had just loaded up a movie on our upstairs TV and my dad called up to me. When I tried to respond, it sounded like gibberish. I panicked. I had lost my ability to speak and I felt incredibly weak in my upper body. Both my parents

realized that we needed to get to the ER and fast. My dad was able to get me down our stairs. The ER took me in instantaneously with no questions asked and by this time, I was able to somewhat speak although my words were very slurred and I had to try very hard to be understood. I ended up staying at the hospital for four days while they watched me very closely and continued treatment. Eventually, I got to go home and started sleeping on our couch on our main floor in case something like that happened again.

During all these weeks as I was in and out of the hospital, I would see my cardiologist every Friday. There was one week where I was starting to feel a little bit better and for once I felt like there may be a little bit of hope for me. But Friday of that week, when I woke up that morning, I could barely breathe. My breathing was extremely shallow and I was breathing as if I were hyperventilating. My cardiologist was extremely concerned about my breathing. It turns out that fluid was draining off of my heart and draining into my pleuritic cavity that surrounds your lungs. There was so much fluid in there that my left lung was on the brink of collapsing. My cardiologist then told me that she wanted to do a same day procedure to drain that fluid out of my cavity and that with that, I'd also be admitted into the hospital and it could be a couple days to run cultures on the fluid that they were going to suck out to check for infection. Within two or three hours of my appointment, I was admitted as a patient and I was waiting in a hospital bed in the PRE OPP department for my procedure. I was 100% conscious during the operation and it was extremely painful even with the numbing agents. When it was done, they decided that it would be best to leave my chest tube placed as my heart was still draining a lot of fluid but I was able to breathe again. All in all, they were able to remove over two liters of fluid.

Fast forward another five days. I was told that I would need a second chest tube placed and they wanted to drain even more fluid out of my pleuritic cavity. Fortunately, this time I was given the option to be put under conscious sedation. Even with the second tube placed, I still had fluid buildup in areas that weren't draining to the tubes. Within a few days, we met with a different surgeon who explained to us that I was going to need a serious surgery to get rid of fluid in my upper left side of my chest.

I spent nearly a week in the cardiac ICU before the day of my surgery. My parents were both with me in PRE OPP. I didn't know until just minutes before my surgery that my best friend actually called in sick to work and tried to get in to see me before surgery but they wouldn't let him due to Covid, because Anschutz only allowed two visitors per day to each patient. Even though he wasn't able to get in, he waited at the hospital throughout the entire surgery to make sure I got out and was in recovery. I now had a third chest tube, as well as six additional IVs on top of the one I already had. I literally looked like some sort of cyborg or robot or alien with all the tubes and wires.

Ever since my surgeries and procedures, I've been back in the hospital quite a few times for reasons ranging from small to large. Nothing about this entire thing has been easy to deal with. My life changed in a way I never thought it would. But one thing that did not change for me was my faith in God and that he was with me every single step of the way. There were so many times where I felt I was close to death but I felt even closer to God. Multiple people sent me get well soon cards and reached out to me. I wasn't able to talk with everyone but without all the support from everyone that I received and without God walking through it all with me, there's no doubt that I wouldn't be alive today to tell you all my story. Thank you all for taking the time to read my devotional.

We Need Each Other

Wednesday, March 22

Doug Phelps

I have come to observe how much of humanity is often blinded by what we fear. To fear something is thoroughly human, to be blind in some way is therefore unavoidable. If we fear heights – something I was afraid of for most of my young life – we are blind to the humility that vast perspectives can bring. If we fear quiet, small spaces, we are blind to the comfort of solitude. If we fear change, we are blind to the richness of life. If we fear emotion, we are blind to the comfort of Oneness with another. If we fear death, we are blind to the mysteries of the unknown.

These and other fears are what each of us struggle to come to grips with. Like a blind child is guided by an adult, it is why we need each other to help guide our way. In the course of our lives, we all repeatedly stumble and struggle, in and out of the grace of the wholeness of life. We do this, in the course of our lives, by taking turns being the blind one or the kind, loving guide. To gather together with others, aware of our shared lives. Grasping and strapping ourselves to one another, taking the leap and experiencing wonderful discoveries.

To leap from an airplane at an elevation of 12,000 feet above the ground was a gift to the vastness that I could see of creation before my eyes. I now dream about being in space someday.



There are many reasons to be kind. As a shirt Donna has says, “In a world where you can be anything, be kind.” Being kind can be hard. I have often reached out and sometimes it felt like a mistake. Sometimes I’ve been stung in response. But it doesn’t matter because this is what I do. This is what we all do. It is the reaching out that is more important than the sting. We need each other on our paths of life. Most often, being kind is so powerful.

As I shared a year ago, I have a small scoresheet I use to track certain daily life objectives. I started this in late 2020 as the pandemic was in full swing, and I still use it. One of these objectives is, “Make a difference in one person’s life.” The daily focus and opportunity for transformation is pivotal to managing my life and the fears that arise. I falter; aye, I suggest I must falter to grow. Taking turns as the blind one and as a loving guide. I am grateful for it.

Transformational Travel To Haiti

Thursday, March 23

Erin Fisher, Director of Schools

T - roubing

R - eality

A - cute

N - otice

S - alvation

F - or

O - thers

R - evealing

M - alevolent

A - pathy

T - oward

I - ndividuals

O - of

N - neighboring

A - nchored

L - and

T -- rust

R - elationships

A -- biding

V -- isitor

E - mpathy

L - ove

T -- enacity

O -- ngoing

H -- ope

A -- wareness

I -- am

T -- ransformed

I -- ndelibly

Matthew 19:26 – Jesus looked at them and said, “With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.”

I pray for the people of Haiti to be heard, for grace to fall on them as a nation. Amplify their voices and strengthen our hearing, walk with them toward the bright, lively and whole life they deserve. Amen.

Baking Braids and Buried Memories

Thursday, March 24

Dana and Mark Hess

The passing of a loved one, especially your mother can certainly be a transformative experience. The person who gave birth to you and helped shape who you are is suddenly no longer in your life and now lives only in your memories. Mark recently lost his mother shortly before this past Christmas and Dana lost her mother many years ago just after the birth of our eldest daughter Gabrielle. Keeping a firm hold on the fond memories of our mothers is both an important part of passing on their legacies and a way to tend to the corners of our hearts where they reside. With the passing of time, however, even the best memories sometimes fade. We trek on in our life journey while the transformations add together to form who we become, often blurring what were once sharp pictures in our minds of people, places and experiences.

Occasionally, a smell or taste can immediately trigger one or more of these buried memories and transport you back to a wonderful time spent with a loved one or momentarily offer a remembrance of a cherished part of that person. This is the case for both of us and our moms. For Dana, it's her mom's dinner roll recipe that we pull out on holidays and special occasions. It has become a family tradition for our family (and whoever happens to be celebrating with us) to engage in the 'ritual' of making the dough, rolling it out, cutting out the circles, then folding in half, dunking in butter and set aside by the dozens to rise and await baking right before dinner. The recipe and baking process is relatively simple. However, invariably the flour starts to fly, faces get 'painted' white and laughter prevails. Then, the stories of Grandma Dottie (Dana's mom) and her distinctly biting wit fill the conversation and she is remembered in the best of ways. Later the smell of the baking rolls and the unmistakable taste (it's all that butter) help to excavate even more sweet memories of Grandma Dottie – transforming a loss into a reminder that love and life win.

Mark's mother's recipe also reminds us of her love and God's ability to transform sadness into joy. For as long as we can remember Mark's mom (Gerda) made what we call almond braids for friends and family at Christmas time. She would work tirelessly into the night for several days to get them all baked and wrapped up with a red bow and evergreen bough. It was her version of a German 'stollen' or Christstollen which is a tradition dating back to 14th century Germany. Many Germans baked stollen loaves at Christmas to honor princes and church dignitaries, and to sell at fairs and festivals for holiday celebrations. For the past few years, Gerda's condition prevented her from making or delivering these delicious gifts. So, our family got together to continue the tradition. Making one or two of the almond filled braids is not necessarily difficult. Preparing, baking and delivering twenty to thirty of them presents a challenge! It took several days and many hands, but as a family we had managed to have them all delivered before Christmas – much to Gerda's delight. Tears of joy were shed the first time she thought she'd have to end the tradition, but then was surprised with a car full of stollen.

Gerda passed away this past December. Her funeral was held the week of Christmas at Abiding Hope. A few days prior, Mark had the crazy idea of making 160 mini-almond braids for all the attendees as a gift of sorts from Gerda. Around Christmas time, she would have wanted her funeral to be more about giving and love than loss and disappointment. We hoped that the braids, wrapped with a red bow and small evergreen bough might help do this. Dana and our daughters Gabrielle and Kiera were scheduled to be out of town the weekend before the funeral. Mark, perhaps not thinking clearly, was determined to make the mini-treats for the funeral with only the help of his sister and niece. Then, God gifted us with a mini-miracle. Dana, Gabrielle,

and Kiera's trip was canceled at the last minute. So, we had the full team and weekend to make the braids. After two very long days, by the Tuesday of the funeral, we had them all made, wrapped up and boxed for transport to the church.



The friends and family celebrating Gerda's life that day were able to take with them a taste of her giving and caring personality. As a family we were blessed with the smells, tastes, and memories of our mother while we labored to make the almond braids. Now, as with "Grandma Dottie's rolls", those very sensory and experiential reminders will spark the release of the great memories of past loved ones... once again transforming loss into joy. We give thanks to God for these amazing recollections of the women who gave us life and enriched our world.

"He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds."

-Psalms 147:3

The recipe for Gerda's almond braids is included here. The top part is the dough to be prepared a day ahead of time. The bottom sections show how to make the filling and form the braids. If you would like the recipe for Dottie Jordan's Rolls, contact Dana at dana@abidinghope.org.

Gerda's Christmas Stollen (Almond Braids)

Dough

This terrific refrigerator dough is the basis for a variety of sweet rolls, coffee cakes, dinner rolls, Danish pastries and holiday breads. You can make it up to 4 days in advance; it handles best when thoroughly chilled.

- 1 envelope active dry yeast
- 1/4 cup warm (115 degrees) water
- 1 cup heavy cream (I use whipping cream)
- 1/4 cup evaporated milk
- 3 egg yolks, slightly beaten
- 3-1/3 cups flour
- 1/4 cup sugar
- 1 teaspoon salt
- Butter at room temperature

Stir yeast into warm water to dissolve. In small bowl, mix well the dissolved yeast, cream, milk and egg yolks; set aside. In a large bowl, stir together flour, sugar and salt. Cut in 1/3 cup butter with pastry blender until mixture resembles coarse crumbs. Stir yeast mixture into flour mixture just to moisten. Coat bowl with butter, place dough in bowl and spread dough with light film of butter to prevent drying; cover bowl with plastic wrap and refrigerate overnight or up to 4 days. Shape and bake as directed in the following recipes.

ALMOND FILLED BRAID

Recipe using all of the dough, makes three braids.

Filling

- 1 cup almond paste
- 1 cup confectioners' sugar
- 2 egg whites
- Granulated sugar
- Sliced almonds

To make filling, in bowl, blend almond paste, confectioners' sugar, and 1 egg white until smooth; set aside. On a lightly floured surface, roll out 1/2 of dough to a 12" x 24" or equivalently sized rectangle. Brush dough with melted butter, cut horizontally into three equal sized strips (approximately 4" x 24"). With fingers, crumble or place small rolls of filling at the wide edge of each strip. Roll dough to cover filling, pinching seam to seal (seam may have to be moistened with a small amount of water to seal).

To form braid, use two of the filled strips for each braid to make a 4-strand braid as follows: Bend strips to form 2 large U's. Align strips so they are even at the bottom and the strips are next to each other. With the ends facing you, start with the first strand on the left and weave through the other strands. Continue in this way down the length of the strands, tuck ends under and seal. (again, a small amount of water may be necessary to seal well.)

Place braids on greased cookie sheets, brush with remaining egg white, slightly beaten. Sprinkle braid with granulated sugar and almonds. (I let the dough rise, then brush with egg white, sprinkle with almonds first and then with the sugar—try it both ways and see what works best for you.) Cover braids with waxed paper and a dish towel, let rise in a warm, draft-free place until light to touch and double in bulk. (50 minutes to 2 hours depending on season, humidity and temperature in the room).

Bake in preheated 350 degree oven for 20 minutes or until golden brown.

Cool and drizzle with confectioners' sugar glaze.

Confectioners' Sugar Glaze

Blend 1 cup confectioners' sugar, 2 tablespoons cream, 1 tablespoon melted butter and 1 teaspoon vanilla until smooth. Glaze should flow easily from spoon. Adjust liquid if necessary.

"Dear Mary"
Saturday, March 25
Luke Fish

*Been 21 for 8 months now, made it here with help somehow
Never thought I'd live to see the day
I look around at all these faces, I know they love me, I'm still anxious
Don't know what I want to hear you to say.
Oh, I'm asking you, I'm asking you for help
Don't know why I'm talking, I should do it by myself. No,
Hope lies in communion, which I can't do on my own
I need some help, I need your help, to make this place a home, so*

*Say a prayer for me Dear Mary
I'm broken lying on the ground
Say a prayer for me Dear Mary
My heart ain't making any sound*

*Been livin', workin' healin', lovin', still life is push-to-shove'n,
Might be time to open a new door
I'm scared to try but I'm still trying, I'm scared of heights but I'm still flying
I have never been here before
The past lies in the past, but the future's now and here
I don't take it, hesitating, paralyzed with fear
This life is all I have, oh I can't be scared forever
I grab your hand, you jump with me, we'll do it all together, so*

*Say a prayer for me Dear Mary
I'm broken lying on the ground
Say a prayer for me Dear Mary
My heart ain't making any sound*

*And I, I know
My heart will go on
And I, I know
I need to be strong
But the past five years have broke my heart
Need your help to find the parts
And make me feel whole
The past twelve months have shown me that
Only love can take me back
And help me heal my soul
Only love can take me home*

*I've been beaten, I'm still shaken
I feel like my heart is breaking
I listen to the ticking of the clock
I'm used to gasping, used to grieving
So alone I can't believe I
See a hundred lanterns through the fog*

*I hear people, I hear laughter
I just want to get there faster
Weird to know that I will find a way
I reach my friends, feel their love
I thank all of the stars above
I am where I need to be today*

*I say a prayer for you, Dear Mary
You were with me when I was cry'n
I say a prayer for you, Dear Mary
I know you heard me every time, oh*

*I know you're here for me Dear Mary
When I feel broken on the ground
I know you're here for me Dear Mary
When I'm lost, I am found*

I wrote this song a while ago as a reflection of a piece of my life that felt, at the time, completely overwhelming. Mary, in this song, isn't literally who I'm singing to. Instead, her name represents the love & community I've found around myself during difficult times. I won't say my life doesn't feel overwhelming now, but what I've come to realize is that the hard times will pass – even if you have to wait a while.

Adopting Devo
Monday, March 27
Lisa Selzler

Losing a pet is hard. Not the hardest thing, but I would definitely list it in the top ten.

My way of softening the blow of losing a dog, is to get a new one ASAP. As the resident poo gatherer, my husband, Gene, would rather we take our time. He needs time to fully process his grief and save the monthly monetary and timely costs that a furry housemate consumes.

After our last pet loss, I humored him... sort of. I compiled a comprehensive, and extremely specific, list of attributes of our next "perfect dog"—age, size, color, breed, temperament, etc. I endlessly searched online and visited shelters and rescues all along the front range, dragging Gene along when I could. Months dragged on.

One hot Saturday, we went to a large gathering of rescue agencies who brought their available dogs looking for forever homes. Not finding the pup I had originally come to see, we wandered through the booths seeing what was left when I spotted a cage with a mom dog and her three, 3-month-old puppies. They were an unsightly crew, dreadfully skinny and practically hairless, having just been rescued from a dump in Kansas the week prior, I later found out. The mom looked up at me, our eyes locked, and she and I both knew our hunt was over! I rounded up Gene, who had wandered off looking for shade, announcing I had found our dog. His objections were loud and strong, "BUT THE LIST!... This mongrel does not fit ANYTHING on our list!" My tears came and Gene realized it really was over. No use trying to resist.

Bringing her home was an adventure, she had no leash training at all, and the smell, UGH the SMELL! Her teeth were ugly, and she had so little hair on her, we weren't sure what color she was, much less any guess as to her breed. Unsurprisingly, after a thorough vet exam, we found she was severely malnourished, had mange head to toe, and was host to three different types of worms. Adding to her "allure," she had massive separation anxiety to the point of destroying wire cages, ripping the back from our leather couch, tearing the molding off the door to the garage, and chewing up the new sandals of our pet sitter!

We weren't going to give up on her just yet. But, what do you call a dog with a gray, hairless tail that leaves a whip-like mark on your thigh when you get too close to the happy, vigorous wag? Devo, of course (think of your '80s music trivia)!

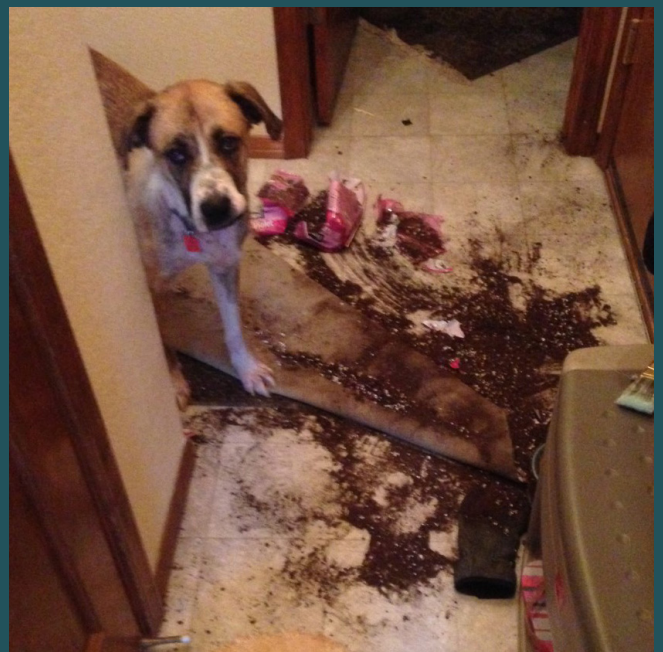
With medication, food, baths, walks, a much larger, stronger cage, and lots and lots of love, Devo transformed from a hot, smelly mess into a sweet, happy, healthy, affectionate addition to our family. She greets everyone with a friendly wag (with her now thick and furry tail) and the expectation of affection in return.

There is so much we can learn from Devo:

- When we make lists and plans for what we want when we want it, God provides us with what we really need when we need it
- Unconditional love is given in spite of the size of bank accounts, skin color, or daily successes or failures
- When basic needs are met and lots and lots of love is given, even the messiest of creatures (and people) can be transformed
- Relationships are key to our happiness, and we should always start from a place of total acceptance

Let us look to all of creation with the same unconditional love we get from our pets, and be reminded that with love, even the messiest of us can be transformed.

Additional food for thought from Job 12:7-10: 'But ask the animals, and they will teach you; the birds of the air, and they will tell you; ask the plants of the earth, and they will teach you; and the fish of the sea will declare to you. Who among all these does not know that the hand of the Lord has done this? In his hand is the life of every living thing and the breath of every human being.



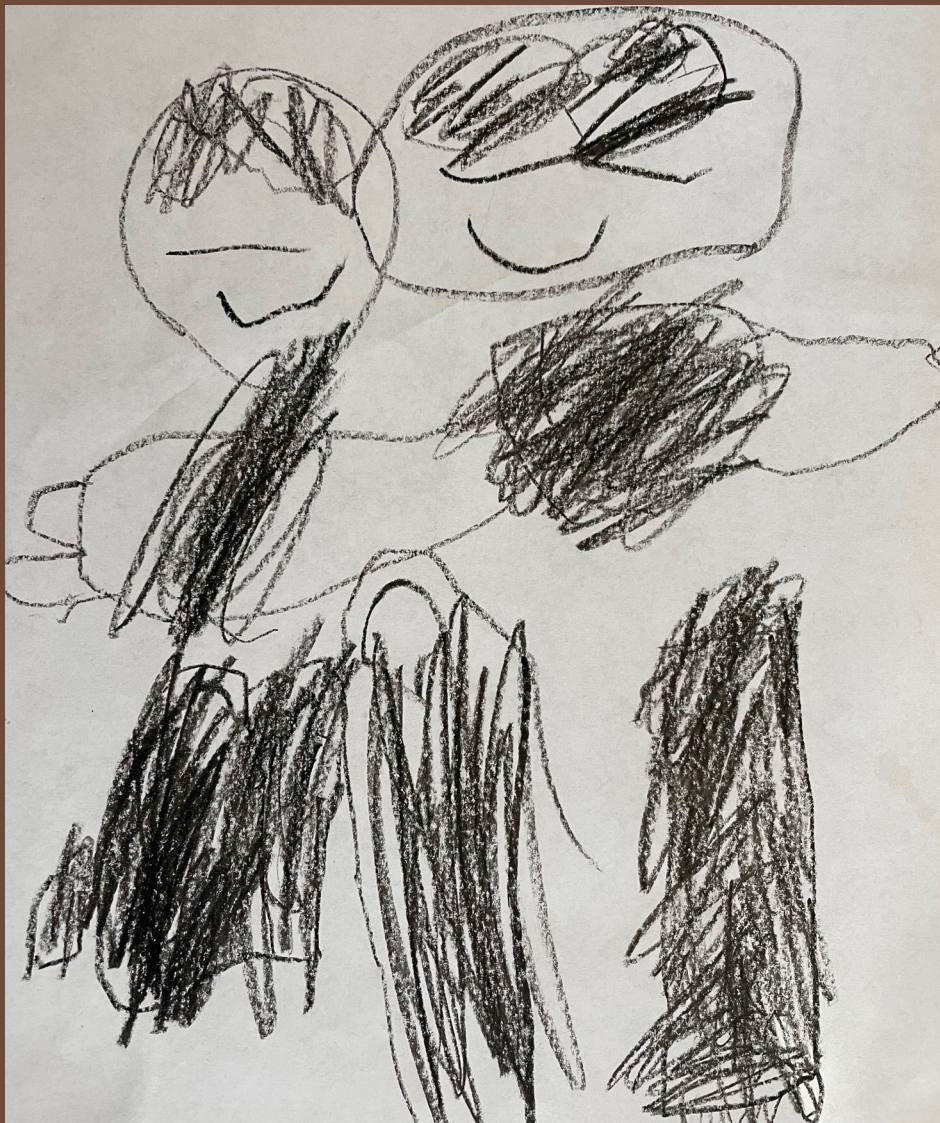
Mother of a Change

Tuesday, March 28

Rebecca Burris, Director of Communication

When I think about transformation, I think about becoming a mother. Matt and I took so many classes on labor, birth, and breastfeeding, that it was still quite a shock to realize we were in charge of this little guy for EVERYTHING. Like all moments of transformation, especially in the early morning hours of newborn life, there were times I wished I could go back to my life before the transformation. As we know, there is no going back. What a wonderful gift that is. As I have settled more into my role as a "MOM!!," I am so thankful for that tiny infant who rocked my world and changed me.

That little boy is a little older now and is very into art. About a year ago he asked me what he should draw, and I told him to draw "love." This is what he came up with.



It is a picture of me hugging him. Thank God for transformation.

Healing Work

Wednesday, March 29

Stacia Rumer

I have been practicing yoga for over a decade. I find focusing on breath and postures keeps my mind chatter dampened so I can flow into a moving meditation. I usually feel refreshed and more open and calmer after each session.

Another aspect of yoga I really enjoy is practicing arm balances. They are a combination of strength and balance and flexibility. Astavakrasana (eight-angle pose) is one of my favorites because of the challenge it gave me to learn and the joy I felt when I finally got it. I had to learn it in incremental steps and fell on my face a few times trying to force myself into the pose. The final step I needed was to trust that I had the skills to surrender and float into the pose.



I recently had a minor shoulder injury. I really wanted to practice my arm balances because I was afraid that if I went too long without practicing, I would have to build up the strength and learn how to do them all over again. However, I realized I had to back off as the pain was trying to tell me to let my shoulder heal. So here I am, starting over, but at least I have some muscle memory to work with.

I've got some healing work to do in other areas of my life as well. I carry resentment around with me – toward someone in particular, as well as myself. I have found times of strength and balance when I can trust myself to forgive. But when a new hurt comes along, I feel like I lose all the progress I made. I keep wanting forgiveness to be permanent, but, for me, it has to happen over and over again. I want to cling to final transformation, but sometimes I am forced to step back and go through the work to forgive again. Just like with the arm balance, forgiveness takes a lot of work to get there, and after injury, it requires building up strength again and relearning the balance and trust. Once again, I am trying to give myself time to heal and hope that with more work and time I will be able to return to a time of peace.

Ambushed

Thursday, March 30

Keefer Dowell

The cliché of transformation and change speaks to its abundance and its value. Stagnancy is regarded as a kind of complacent evil and is accepted, if frowned upon. For life, for me, it was easy to ignore platitudes and old wisdom because where I had settled in life was comfortable. There is nothing to fear when tomorrow is already figured out.

I was ambushed by transformation. My life, my home, the world where I lived was there and solved one day and cut from under the next. I had not moved, but the world had moved around me.

What had been days of leisure and simple choices became ones of earnest consideration, hope for the future, and well-earned rest. What had been resignation and apathy became joy and self-worth.

Changing my life, leaving behind a life of stagnancy made me realize that it was not that stasis was comfortable, it's that stasis was unfeeling. I didn't consider anything, not even myself. When change came, I was struck with just how alive I was in the world. Better than that, was just how much of the world was there, how much more time I felt I had, and had earned.

Newness was wholeness.



Photo taken in Springfield, CO

Gravity
Friday, March 31
Delaney Lim

*i've been feeling lost
since the beginning of adam and eve
i've been feeling lost
never know quite what to believe*

*your way is your way and mine is another
i'll say what i say while you fight my brother
all things will end well if we just stay together
but holding my hand it seems that we are not who we say we are*

*gravity
gravity's what's pulling me down*

*my sanity
where does my life go now*

*the world is pulling me
i'm so sorry
forgive the sins i do now (what sins can i commit now)*

*gravity
gravity's what's pulling me down*

*what am i doing here
everything i say is imposter syndrome
who are we kidding here
is that purpose of religion*

*your way is your way and mine is another
i'll say what i say while you fight my brother
all things will end well if we just stay together
but holding my hand it seems that we are not who we say we are*

*gravity
gravity's what's pulling me down*

*my sanity
where does my life go now*

*the world is pulling me
i'm so sorry
forgive the sins i do now (what sins can i commit now)*

*gravity
gravity's what's pulling me down*

*your love keeps me anchored x3
i'm lifted/weightless in your gravity*

*your love keeps me anchored x3
i'm lifted/weightless in your gravity*

*gravity
gravity's what's pulling me down*

*my sanity
where does my life go now*

*the world is pulling me
i'm so sorry
forgive the sins i do now (what sins can i commit now)*

*gravity
gravity's what's pulling me down*

*gravity
let us be stronger now*

I wrote this song while on Servant Tour. This past tour, I felt I was experiencing some major transformation. Just in my life, I had graduated high school and was about to start college. I was saying goodbye to all my childhood activities and starting fresh. Over the summer and while on tour, God really took this as an opportunity to push me out of my comfort zone, and into a new light of faith. I realized there was transformation happening within myself, as I was developing a new level of "thirst" for being the heart, hands, and feet of Jesus. I watched transformation in my peers over summer, and tour, as they also matured in their lives and faith.

Something that resonated with me all through the summer was the question of, "What does it mean to be Christian, and what does it mean to follow God?" This song was written out of the questions I developed during my walk of faith over the summer. Christianity has been used to harm so many people. It has been used to divide so many people. As we are both lifted and grounded in Christ, I think we have to remember why we are doing this all in the first place. To avoid being caught up in the turmoil and let ourselves be caught up in the ever encompassing gravity of God's love.

Palm Sunday Weekend

Saturday, April 1

Pastor Julie McNitt

Matthew 21:1-11

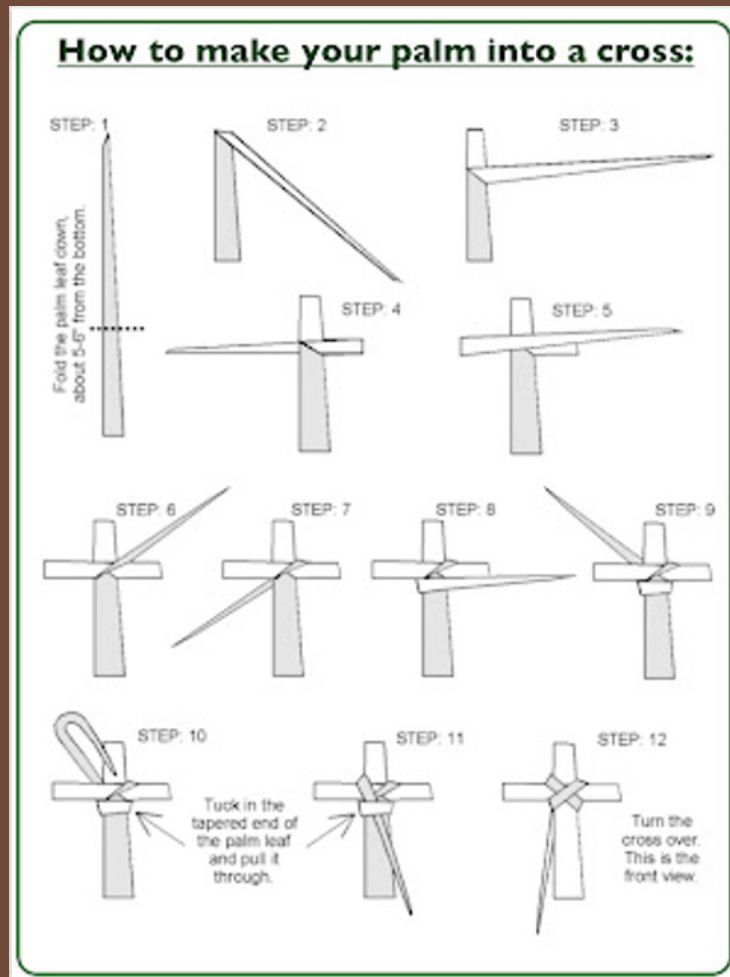
On Palm Sunday we commemorate Jesus' triumphant entry into the city of Jerusalem by waving palm branches in worship and calling out "Hosanna! Hosanna in the highest! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!" Tell me though, what happens after worship?

Will you leave that palm forgotten in the pew? Will you lose it in the car or on the kitchen counter? Will you throw it out with the weekend's other refuse?

Or will you fold it, while you still can, into the shape of the cross? Will you bend its edges into the shape of surrender. Will you twist and turn and tuck until it resembles sacrifice? Will you fold your palm into the shape of love?

In the final line of the poem "The Summer Day", the poet Mary Oliver asks, "Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?" It's a good question.

I wonder, will you shape your life to be like Christ? Will you bend it to God's ways? Will you twist and turn and tuck until you resemble a servant? Will you be transformed into the shape of love, into the shape of Christ?



Friendship and Hospitality

Monday, April 3

Refugee Team

Keep on loving one another as brothers and sisters. Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers for by doing that some have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it.

—Hebrews 13:1-2

When the Refugee team first organized in November of 2021, none of us knew how or why God was calling us or what to expect. We were anxious but willing to start a new venture. We could not have known back then how much these two Afghan families would teach us about hospitality, gratitude, acceptance, faith, and unconditional love.

The Zamani and Sharifi families always welcome us into their small apartments and share their best nuts and sweets with us when we come to visit. In their culture, you sit down, eat and talk with friends before you do any “business.” It’s amazing how calming that can be. Over the months, the team has walked alongside our Afghan friends, trying to help them navigate our systems, culture, day to day needs, and American expectations. They came from middle to upper middle class situations in Kabul to arrive in the US with just three suitcases and two backpacks for each family of five. They helped our service people in Afghanistan and were targeted for persecution because of it. Yet, they remain grateful for every day, accepting of their new life, faithful to God (whom they call Allah) and spread their love daily in smiles, friendship, and hospitality.

It is hard to tell who has gained more from our service to our Refugee families, them or us. We do know that these friendships have been transformational and will be life-long. By Abiding Hope and the Refugee team sharing our gifts of time and resources, perhaps we have “shown hospitality to angels without knowing it.”

The Abiding Hope Refugee Team,
Gail Noble, Mary Chapel, Cheryl and Gary Nowakowski, Mary and Curt Candler, Bruce and Alisha Lindsey, Kevin Schaal, Bob and Nena Steger



Transforming Spring

Tuesday, April 4
Stephanie Harper

Spring is always the season where I think the most about the idea of transformation and new life. I wrote this poem in that frame of mind. -SH

I consider the possibility
of transformation
while watching
an emerging
butterfly.

I've never felt this kind of first light.

My body aches
as I move,
a tired sort of fumbling.

Peonies are also bright
and fragrant,
as the bud opens
into petals
delicate and smooth.

My living has never happened only once.

Instead, I wake each morning
with hopeful optimism
that this day
will show me some miracle
I haven't seen before,
or perhaps something
I've seen already
but today there will be a moment
of wonder
waiting.

Easter Cross Project
Wednesday, April 5
Abiding Hope Preschool and Kindergarten



Hudson, age 5: It is fun to make crosses. This is the first cross that I have ever made. At school I see a huge cross on the roof and I have always wanted to make one. I think about when Jesus died on the cross.



Brax, age 6: I see crosses at Abiding Hope. Crosses make me think of Jesus. I know Jesus died on the cross. I am going to hang it up in my house so my whole family can think about Jesus.

Maundy Thursday

Thursday, April 6

Pastor Jay Gamelin, Lead Servant for Family Life

There is a Danish word I adore. It's a small word that has a rich depth of meaning that gets to the heart of what I love about having people over to my house. The word is *hygge*, pronounced HOO-guh.

I first encountered this during my travels to Denmark. For a few years I made my way to this exceptional country to walk alongside the community of faith there, playing music and speaking of Jesus to a country where only 2% of the population profess a faith in Jesus.

The art of *hygge* was introduced to me through my visits to the houses of worship, and when I say houses of worship, I mean we met in peoples' homes and gathered around a table where we would sing (but not too loud because we didn't want to disturb the neighbors), there would be teaching, we'd pray together and bless one another. As we wrapped up worship, it was time for coffee and cake, absolutely essential to every gathering.

It was explained to me that what was important about these gatherings was *hygge*, that is creating an intentional environment in that space. It was about having candles and soft light. It was about setting the table just so. It was about singing together that was not too showy so that all felt comfortable singing.

Hygge is intangible, an environment that develops a culture, a space that invited prayer, fostered community, and generated the right space to experience a feeling of welcome.

Maundy Thursday is a gathering that is all about *hygge*. It is a night where a story is told over a meal that connects one to the other. It is the environment we make when we fill it with the intentional act of washing feet, celebrating communion, and remembering the story of God. It's about fostering a community around the table to listen and enact the words of Jesus who says "Do this when you remember me."

This Maundy Thursday, whether you gathering in community in worship (at Abiding Hope we invite you to join us for worship at the Nature School with our friends at Genesis Presbyterian) or you gather with friends around the table in your home, or perhaps you simply sit on your own, take a moment and practice *hygge*; light a candle, turn down the lights, maybe take a moment to play soft music, and enter into the practice of holy listening so that you too might foster an environment of contemplation on Jesus' love for all.

Good Friday

Friday, April 7

Pastor Jay Gamelin, Lead Servant for Family Life

Who dies on Good Friday but God?

The god-self surrendering at the altar of wood we stack
to pin the one who would ask us to be free when
we'd rather live staring at the walls of our prison.

Who dies on Good Friday but God?

our supposed blindfold justice pointing fingers at the cross
and the one who is guilty, guilty, guilty and
deserving of the very punishment we inflict on
the innocent.

Who dies on Good Friday but God?

not just the son, not the flesh, but trinity,
the whole of the vision made blind by our
restless and wandering eye that would
make idols of the mirror.

Who dies on Good Friday but God?

not a politic of supremacy and victory but abject surrender,
giving up and taking on, loving all to death and asking us
to see death again.

Who dies on Good Friday but God?

not to save us from punishment but as a remarkable
sign of what love truly is;
giving all for all so all may have all.

Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world,
have mercy on us.

“Bridge of Sighs”

Easter Saturday, April 8

Kim Gnagey, Lead Servant for Worship Life



For song, go to link or scan QR code: <http://bit.ly/3xue5fq>

*Looking down the road I see pavement stretched out in front of me, Endless,
Winding through the trees and sky.*

I look behind at tears I've cried of laughter and of pain, I hear the train rushing by again...

*And though I'll try to say goodbye, Make sure all these loose ends are tied,
I know my heart will trail behind as I walk these miles across this bridge of sighs.*

You told me that I shouldn't leave, and made your case so brilliantly; But you told me, "Love, I'll set you free."

*And though I know it's time to go,
I wish that I could stay and be the one to chase your frowns away.*

*And though I'll try to say goodbye, Make sure all these loose ends are tied,
I know my heart will trail behind as I walk these miles across this bridge of sighs.*

*Though this is the end of one life, Another starts anew.
I'll turn the page and take the stage, But I'll always remember you.*

*And though I'll try to say goodbye, Make sure all these loose ends are tied,
I know my heart will trail behind as I walk these miles across this bridge of sighs.*

Journaling, poetry, and songwriting were tools I used from a young age to safely channel my emotions. Then, I started taking those writings and turning them into songs that I would share with audiences, baring my soul with eyes squeezed shut and a keyboard between them and myself.

I wrote this particular piece when I was about 25. I was in a relationship that was causing deep existential turmoil, a paradox of being the most true love I had ever experienced and the most painful situation I had ever been in. I had a music career that started early, in my late teens and early twenties, so at 25, I had already gone through cycles of deep burnout. I felt like the only choice for me at that point was to get away.

The chance to get away presented itself in the form of a condo in Normal, IL, that was the primary home for my grandfather and his wife who were snow-birding in Texas for six months. In my haste to remove myself from the situation, I forgot to prepare myself for the goodbyes. I just packed up my Volvo station wagon and drove away, and it wasn't until I was there for a while that I felt exactly how much I had walked away from.

Ultimately, this was a short period of time I spent away from my home, but it was a transformative time. It made me realize just how much I had to be grateful for in my family, friendships, and career. While I did return to that painful relationship, it led to me becoming a mother to my wonderful kids. Ten years later, I would move to Denver, and the words of this song would become real all over again.

Transformation can be painful, and healing takes time. When we lay something to rest, the space between death and resurrection can feel tumultuous, lonely, empty, even scary. There's

upheaval and uncharted territory waiting at every turn until we settle ever so briefly into a new normal, and then begin another cycle of death and resurrection.

Whatever big feelings you have inside you today, honor them. They are a part of your humanity, and that humanity is a gift. That emotion is a teacher and a friend, and it is only temporary, as are we in our earthly form.

Let out the sigh.
Joy comes in the morning.

The Resurrection of Our Lord

Easter Sunday, April 9

Pastor Doug Hill, Lead Pastor

Christ is risen!
We are risen!
I am risen!

A few years ago, we created this Easter Proclamation to remind us that the resurrection of Christ isn't simply about one person who lived in Palestine two thousand years ago. In fact, the Christ is far more than the person of Jesus.

On Day 1 of the creation (see Genesis 1:1-5) God said, "Let there be light." That light is the Christ. It is God's vision for the existence of everything necessary to generate and sustain life. Therefore, we say that the universe is the first incarnation of the Christ.

The second incarnation of the Christ is Jesus of Nazareth. He does not possess the whole of God within himself but he is the very essence of God within the creation who came to reveal to us that we too are part of the Christ and hence a part of God. When humanity crucified Jesus, we crucified the Christ, we crucified the essence of being, we crucified God's vision for life, we crucified the universe, we crucified ourselves.

When God resurrected the Christ, God resurrected the universe, God resurrected each and every one of us. Hence we get to choose each day whether we want to live out of our old, fallen nature that misses the mark in being who God created us to be. Or, we can choose to live as resurrected new human beings drawn out of the tomb to live as children of God bringing love and life to all.

As new human beings, we live with the certain hope that the threats of suffering and death do not have the last word. Injustice does not have the last word. Division, violence, hatred, evil do not have the last word. Love and life win!

As such we are freed to give our whole selves toward the unifying of all things and the perpetuation of life from generation to generation which is what salvation means. We are called to let our individualized concepts of salvation die so that we can be raised into seeing all things as part of God and part of ourselves. All matter and all means ALL!

Let us live today and every day as God's resurrected people bringing God's vision of love and light into our homes, workplaces, schools, neighborhoods, and beyond so that all may experience real life in Jesus' name.



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