

Muscle Memory

Jeremiah 6:16, Isaiah 43:18-19

September 13, 2020

You've heard of muscle memory. It's a repetitive action that encodes into your brain so that you can do that action without really thinking about it — typing in your pin number, driving home from work, riding a bicycle. We also have memories that have penetrated our being beyond cognition of them. I remember being at a pastors retreat in Michigan about 20 years ago. I was living in Indiana at the time. The retreat began with an icebreaker in which we had to share what smell made us think of home. One of the pastors, I hadn't met before that retreat, shared that she had grown up in Southern California and it was the smell of smog and jet fuel on a hot August day when landing at the Ontario Airport. I burst into tears as I remembered that smell...the smell of home.

There are memories we have stored away that relate to smell, sight, touch, taste, sound. It could be a song that transports you back to the moment you realized you were in love. The taste of a popsicle that transports you back to playing hide and seek with the other neighborhood children. The feel of a knitted afghan that reminds you of one that your grandmother would wrap you in when she put you down for a nap at her house. The smell of the Ontario airport on a hot summer day that lets you know you are home.

I was thinking of muscle memory when the church program staff had a Zoom retreat this summer to work on plans for the Fall. We usually have a meeting like that, although it has always be in person until this summer. And in the past we always did broad brush planning for the entire year, but who knows what January will look like in our present reality. So we planned for the Fall in a world that looks completely different than last year or the year before that or the year before that or any year before that in our lifetimes.

We started out by looking at those church events and activities that make up a normal Fall at the La Verne Church of the Brethren — those events that have been part of our life together as a church — so engrained in our memories of what it means to be church together: Back to Fall Sunday, Spiritual Formation and CONNECT! groups, Guess Who's Coming to Dinner, Trick or Treat, Alternative Gift Faire, Thanksgiving Sunday, Advent, Youth shopping and wrapping party, Nut bread Reception, Children's Christmas Program, the Hanging of the Greens, the Christmas Eve service...just to name a few.

But none of these things can be done in the same way. We can't simply count on muscle memory to help us this year. I admit that just listing all of those special events makes me sad, because I miss all of you and all of the things that feel familiar. I miss the sound of the children hurrying down the aisles for Children's Time. I will miss that Sunday you walk into the sanctuary and you realize that Eric Davis has changed out the Peace Cranes for Advent. I miss the taste of our communion bread. I miss the way I feel at the end of a Sunday morning of greeting at the door and being hugged and

kissed by so many of you— like a kitten whose mother has licked it until it is dripping wet. I even miss the smell of our narthex.

There are good reasons that we do the same things every year. Memories or touchstones help us move into a deeper place of connection with the Divine. Singing the same refrain over and over again helps me move into meditation. Familiarity, repetition, the same path over and over again has its goodness. It is like the first scripture you heard today, the one from Jeremiah:

Stand at the crossroads, and look,
and ask for the ancient paths,
where the good way lies; and walk in it,
and find rest for your souls.

This scripture calls us to take the tried and true path...the way of our history...the way of our ancestors. It promises that is where the good way lies. The place that allows our souls to find comfort. The good way is the path made smooth with centuries or decades of practice. When I think of spiritual practices that define who we are as a church I think of Love Feast, baptism, service, prayer, singing in four part harmony, community. Are any of these even possible in a time of social distancing and masks? Does standing at the crossroads and then heading down the same path make any sense right now? I've seen churches try to ignore the mandates of State and County officials only to cause pain and suffering for their church family...and all the people with whom they then come into contact.

The other scripture you heard today is from Isaiah and it says:

Do not remember the former things,
or consider the things of old.
I am about to do a new thing;
now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?
I will make a way in the wilderness
and rivers in the desert.

This admonishment to forget what used to be was written to Israel during the time of the Babylonian captivity. Some of the Israelites had been captured and taken to Babylon and some were left behind. These words were written to a conquered and divided people in deep pain. Isaiah is encouraging people not to spend their energy wishing for the way things used to be in a time when nothing was as it used to be. It feels like a message we need to hear right now. When you feel hopeless, the prophet says, know that God is using this time to create something new. Don't lose heart. Open up your imagination to see how the present reality can transform the future.

One scripture invites us to choose the ancient paths and the other one invites us to witness the newness that is springing up all around us.. My friends, this is the daily dilemma in which we find ourselves — look backwards to the way made smooth by years of practice or look forward and walk in a new way.

Today is Back to Fall Sunday. So much of what we love about this day is not possible right now —returning from summer trips to see everyone — hugging and standing on the courtyard talking and catching up; the choir being able to be back together in the choir loft bringing the joy and inspiration of music; new Sunday morning Spiritual Formation classes for our children and adults; enjoying brunch together on the church courtyard; having one of our children bring in the light of Christ at the beginning of the service.

There are days that I wallow in my sorrow for what we can't do together right now. There are days that I am completely overwhelmed by all the new things that I am learning to do in this virtual reality. But most days I find myself in awe at how unquenchable the Spirit of God is. There is newness all around our church. We used to do church within a geographical boundary but there is no such barrier now. One of our families who lives in New York City can contribute to worship just as well as someone who lives one block from the church. We used to create worship within a fairly regimented order to accommodate the attention span of children (and adults) or the length of service so that when the Hillcrest bus arrived people were ready to go. The parameters of what we can create do not have to fit into a tight logistical framework. We have figured out new ways to do anointing, memorial services, fellowship time, CONNECT! groups, Peace Camp, youth gatherings, and so much more. There are so many things about the ancient path that I miss but would we have expanded ourselves in this new way if we didn't have to? Muscle memory is good and important but sometimes it stifles the new. Have you ever gotten in your car from work, intending to stop at the grocery store and found that you drove directly home without even being cognizant that you were in auto-pilot?

Portions of the ancient path have been temporarily blocked off because that way is just too dangerous right now, But God is making a new way in the wilderness. New streams are springing forth right in the midst of the desert in which we find ourselves... small threads of water that are saving our lives.

As the staff planned for the Fall we had to ask ourselves what is important to hold onto? If it feels important to hold on to something we used to do, is there a way to do it in a new way? And the answer is, "Of course!" For the Spirit of God is alive and well, making a new way.

It is important to remember that every normal was once upon a time the new thing. Our "normal" wasn't always that way...it came to be so over time. We are exercising new muscles and our brain is forming new muscle memories around the new ways we are stretching ourselves these days. We haven't ditched the past. Heavens no! As Nadia Bolz-Weber says, "You have to be deeply rooted in tradition to innovate with integrity." We haven't thrown away the ancient path of Love Feast, service, prayer, community, singing in four-part harmony. We are only innovating with integrity. We are just working out those muscles that had become atrophied and stretching and building them into the important work of community, prayer, service, justice work and loving....in a new way.

I am so grateful to be part of this church family because I know I am on this journey with people who know how to hold on to that which is important but aren't afraid to take hold of the new. People who have the ability to open up their imagination to see how our present reality can transform our future.

So as we enter these Fall months, still at home, still wearing masks, still learning new ways to navigate our reality may we hold on to the parts of our old way of being that matter too much to let them go while we find new streams in the desert...as we innovate with integrity...as we witness the Spirit of God transforming our present reality into a future that stretches our muscles so that we find new ways to love, new ways to be just, new ways to connect, new ways to praise. Amen.