

PERSEVERANCE: WHAT'S THE ALTERNATIVE?  
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OPENING WORDS *Inexplicable* ~ Karen G. Johnston<sup>1</sup>

Inexplicable.  
How we rise each morning,  
instead of burying our heads  
under bedcovers,  
sewing them shut.  
Why we keep on  
welcoming babies  
with bone-deep joy  
to this sordid world.  
How we fill burlap sacks  
with grit and gratitude,  
our hands shredded  
as we drag one over the other.  
How we refuse the daily pull  
towards greedy dark,  
keeping at least one toe,  
some of us whole torso,  
in the light.  
Inexplicable.  
It's what makes a poem  
worth writing, worth reading,  
worth flooding the world  
with redundant, flawed attempts  
at explanation.  
It's just the way it is.  
There is no other way.  
Stumbling every time,  
practice or no.  
Just part of the bargain...  
the unavoidable,  
intractable,  
inexplicable  
bargain.

STORY FOR ALL *Rabbit Listened* ~ Cori Doerrfeld

(This story tells of a young child, who after his beautiful tower is destroyed, is counseled by several friends about what to do.)

MEDITATION *Love Abundant* ~ Alicia Forde<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.uua.org/worship/words/poetry/inexplicable>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.uua.org/worship/words/poetry/love-abundant>

I lift my eyes up to the hills  
from where will my help come?  
My help comes from Love abundant.  
my help comes from the hills  
my help – my help, it comes from  
ancient Mothers whose hearts beat in mine.  
It comes from the trees that sway and the breeze that sways them . . .  
my help comes from all that was and is and will ever be . . .  
I lift my eyes . . . hushed by the soothing touch of waves  
caressing wounded shores  
wounded souls  
I lift my eyes . . . to the horizon bathed by  
the hum of mothers and mothers' mothers  
cradling – -gently rocking  
I lift my voice – call of the sea trees sister moon mother earth  
my soul weeping – a symphony of life overflowing  
I give myself  
I too hum through every pore  
with every breath  
I give myself –  
an extension  
of all that is, was, and ever will be.

**READING**            *Go All The Way*            ~ Charles Bukowski<sup>3</sup>

If you're going to try, go all the way.  
Otherwise, don't even start.  
If you're going to try, go all the way.  
This could mean losing girlfriends, wives, relatives and maybe even your mind.  
Go all the way.  
It could mean not eating for three or four days.  
It could mean freezing on a park bench.  
It could mean jail.  
It could mean derision - mockery - isolation.  
Isolation is the gift.  
All the others are a test of your endurance, of how much you really want to do it.  
And, you'll do it, despite rejection and the worst odds.  
And it will be better than anything else you can imagine.  
If you're going to try, go all the way.  
There is no other feeling like that.  
You will be alone with the gods, and the nights will flame with fire.  
Do it. Do it. Do it. Do it. All the way. All the way.  
You will ride life straight to perfect laughter.  
It's the only good fight there is.

**MESSAGE**            *Perseverance: What's the Alternative?*    ~ Rev. Julie

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<sup>3</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k6\\_QUhUPrF4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k6_QUhUPrF4)

A man hears a knock at his door late one winter's night. He opens his door, looks around, but sees nothing. Just as he's about to step back inside, he notices a small snail on his doorstep. An odd thing in winter. Bemused, and assuming it is dead, he picks it up, and flings the snail as far as he can, across the yard into the garden.

Spring comes, then summer, then fall and before you know it, it's winter again. One night, the doorbell rings. The man gets up, opens the door, and again finds no one there. But, looking down, he spots the same small snail, now rather agitated, and who asks indignantly, "What did you do that for?"<sup>4</sup>

Want to know what perseverance means? Just think about the journey of that snail, not once, but twice. A snail who presumably, shivering in the garden, had a vision of the warmth it might find inside a house. Never mind the first trip across the yard, slowly passing by each blade of withering grass, then up that stoop, step by step, finally reaching the doorway... and then of how it must have traveled up the wall to reach the doorbell. It must have used every bit of energy in its gelatinous body to push in the ringer, and then had to take a perilous leap back to the doorstep in order to be ready to make its way into the warm home. Oh, the anticipation of that moment, after an arduously long journey, and now literally right on the doorstep of a possibility... Only to have itself flung through the air, right back to where it started.

That moment, before beginning again, is rather like the moment at the start of our story, where Taylor built the structure of his dreams...towering and beautiful and amazing...only to have it suddenly brought to ruins.

Have you ever been there?

I can really feel that moment. Finding myself back at square one. Seeing a collapsed dream in front of me. Unsure if I can find the will or the energy to start again.

Perseverance is that impulse, that urge, that movement, that choice to start again, or to keep going. It is defined as steadfastness...doing something despite difficulty or a delay in achieving success...and its Latin roots tell us that it is about seeing something through to the end. And whether it's a vision for a particular project, or a new skill that we're trying to acquire, or simply getting through our days...we all know something about seeing things through to the end.

We had the first of our Journeys sessions this past Thursday (Journeys is a twice-monthly opportunity to come to explore the month's theme with others, and we'll meet again this coming Tuesday, here, at 7pm. Join us if you would.) I always learn a lot at these gatherings, as the diversity of ways that you engage with each theme opens up facets of the theme, in this case of perseverance, that I hadn't considered.

I learned this week, for example, that perseverance for perseverance's sake, isn't necessarily a good thing...that, perseverance should be tempered with wisdom, and accompanied by occasional evaluation.

And, I learned that perseverance needn't be associated with struggle and hardship... that in fact, the discipline to continue with an enjoyable task or practice is another manifestation of perseverance. Again, perseverance is merely steadfastness...stick-to-it-iveness...and needn't be a kind of Sisyphean struggle.

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<sup>4</sup> Found in a sermon by Ellen Quaadgras, "Getting Up and Starting Over". Also found on the web as a joke in several versions

You see, I am a person of perseverance. Perhaps the strongest ‘fruit of my spirit’ is that of long-suffering. I stick with things to the bitter end. I stay till the last. I’m often the very last person in the movie theatre, and even more often, the last person to leave this building on Sundays. I am more likely to see things as a challenge or a struggle than as an exciting possibility. Perseverance is my *modus operandi*. That’s just how I’m built.

Of course, you are likely NOT built that way. You may be short on perseverance and long on vision. You might only be able to access your perseverance when the task is energizing or joyful. Or, you may well approach life without a need to engage in back-breaking perseverance, because for you, life is not a series of challenges, but a flow of ever-changing opportunities.

Part of our purpose, here in this spiritual community, is to engage in a search for truth and meaning, and in that search to have the experience of growth and personal transformation...to find tools, or learn skills, to navigate our daily lives more as the people we want to be than as the people we default to being. And so, my goal, as we explore our monthly themes, is to unearth those understandings and tools that can serve us in living the lives we choose, as we continue to become the people the world is waiting for. And, I’m committed to persevering in this task!

Since Thursday’s Journeys session, I read Margaret Wheatley’s book on this topic, aptly named, and simply, *Perseverance*. She too, opened up facets of understanding that I hadn’t yet considered, and this really is the beauty of theme-based-ministry. Each month’s theme offers us the challenge to dive in more deeply, and to discover new understandings.

Wheatley’s book has a kind of ebb and flow rhythm...moving toward something and then back away...suggesting to me that perseverance is aided by the kind of variation that regular evaluation of our path might foster. Sometimes what is needed to persevere is looking backward, sometimes forward. Sometimes having a sense of urgency, sometimes being patient. Sometimes going it alone, sometimes requiring companionship and support. Wheatley concludes with a list of five strengths required to persevere...

1. Determination to continue your work,
2. To know what you are doing,
3. To find in your work a yearning...knowing that it is what you must do,
4. To silence the voices of doubt, negativity and ego in yourself, and
5. To have a willingness to serve any cause that helps the world.

And I particularly love this Haitian prayer she offers:

“Lord, there is a big devil called Discouragement. We ask you to send him away because he is bothering us.”<sup>5</sup>

Amen to that. Discouragement is bothering us! And is a huge deterrent to perseverance!

Discouragement happens in that moment when you find yourself back in the place where you started, or when what you have been working on falls to ruins. Discouragement is when you can no longer see the possibility, can no longer hold the vision, can no longer feel the yearning to do the work.

I don’t know what happened in the mind and heart of that snail when it landed back in the garden, so far from the door that it had hoped would open to warmth. But in our story today, we were told

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<sup>5</sup> Wheatley, Margaret, *Perseverance* (Berrett-Koehler Publishers: San Francisco, 2010), 92% on Kindle

what happened to Taylor when his world came crashing down. He collapsed in sorrow. He put his head down and cried. He gave up. Temporarily.

And then his friends start showing up, with all the best intention of helping him get his mojo back. "Come on...talk it out...get angry...remember what was...laugh at what happened...seek revenge. Come on!" Any and ALL of these things are what we might need to do in a moment of despair. Eventually, all of these things helped Taylor work through his despair and discouragement, and start again. To persevere.

The point of the story, not so germane to today's message, is that what Taylor needed, first and foremost, was someone who simply listened, and stayed with them, to witness all of the things Taylor needed to work through in order to persevere. And lest we overlook the rabbit, that creature also unswervingly persevered...in showing up for a friend in need. There are many paths up the perseverance mountain, it would seem.

And there are many obstacles, on any one of those paths. Some of them are implied in the list of needed strengths offered by Wheatley. When we need determination, we are confronted with ennui, depression, or discouragement. When we need skill, we come face to face with our ineptitude. When we need purpose, we find disillusionment. When we need positive messages, we hear only self-doubt.

I can't help but think of that snail; I see its journey in large-scale, sort of like Honey I Shrunk the Kids, or the Seussian Whoville that Horton discovered. For that snail, carrying a large burden on its back, every unevenness in the ground must appear a vast landscape of hills and valleys, every blade of grass a tree, every human construction a skyscraper, so that what to us would be a distance of a mere 20 meters is more like the expanse of a continent.

It is said that 'by perseverance, the snail reached the ark', which is to say that in order to survive, even amidst incredible chaos as every creature rushed headlong toward that big boat, the snail had to just keep going. Believing it could survive.

How is it that we keep going? How is it that we don't collapse in despair and give up? Let me offer just a couple of thoughts, and I would love to hear what keeps you going.

First, our very bodies, and the examples offered to us by the natural world, show us that life calls us on. There is another breath, another morning, another season. And in each of those movements, there is possibility.

Remember, we have many resources at hand. I know, they're not very apparent to us when we are discouraged, but still, they exist. There is a signpost, a whiff of the beautiful, a breath of fresh air just around the bend. Always. Life offers this to us. All shall be well. Keep going.

There is our community. The ones who will show up and listen, sitting quietly beside us as we work through our despair and figure out what we need to take the next step. The ones who will hold our hand, or offer a crutch of support, or remind us that we are beloved.

And, of course, our faith...our deep affirmation of goodness and hope, which shores us up, and helps us to move through whatever challenges comes our way. Ours is a faith that believes in the endless possibilities we are offered for transformation, and in our ability to make choices that can lead us toward those possibilities, knowing that we are not alone.

You see, perseverance cannot be about stagnation. Spring comes, then summer, then fall and before you know it, it's winter again. We move through the ebb and flow of life, letting go of

disappointment in favor of what we envision can be. We hold a vision, adjusting that vision when necessary, while at the same time knowing that the best we can do is stretch ourselves into the next step, the next breath, the next morning, the next thing within our reach.

And the fruits of this perseverance? Wheatley says they're not to be found in the world, or in the difference we've made, but rather within ourselves, in "how we feel about self, the world, life, others."<sup>6</sup> Perseverance, she says, reaps the harvest of a larger heart, more courage, and a general sense of comfort in the world. In persevering through all that is, we grow to feel we belong, here, among others who are also on the journey.

We belong. Allow me this paraphrase of the words of the great dancer/choreographer Martha Graham:

In our moments of discouragement, remember that there is a vitality, a life force, a quickening that is translated through you, and only you. There is only one of you in all time, a manifestation that will never exist through any other medium.

Is this not motivation enough to persevere and to contribute all of who we are to the field of all possibility, however draggy or disillusioned we might feel? Is this not motivation enough for us to show up for one another that we all might keep on keepin' on?

A zen saying tells us... "Fall down 53 times. Get up 54." I'll be there to help. Amen.

## READING

~ Jane Hirshfield

More and more I have come to admire resilience. Not the simple resistance of a pillow, whose foam returns over and over to the same shape, but the sinuous tenacity of a tree: finding the light newly blocked on one side, it turns in another. A blind intelligence, true. But out of such persistence arose turtles, rivers, mitochondria, figs -- all this resinous, unretractable earth.

## \* CLOSING WORDS *The Holy Work of Showing Up (abridged)* ~ Ashley Horan<sup>7</sup>

Take a deep breath, say a prayer, sing a song, light your [internal] chalice, feel the force of gravity pulling us all toward the same center – whatever helps you feel more rooted and less alone.

Now do it again. And again, and again.

And, once you feel that rootedness and connection, hear this:

You are loved beyond belief. You are enough, you are precious, your work and your life matter, and you are not alone. You are part of a "we," a great cloud of witnesses living and dead who have insisted that this beautiful, broken world of ours is a blessing worthy of both deep gratitude and fierce protection. Our ancestors and our descendants are beckoning us, compelling us to onward toward greater connection, greater compassion, greater commitment to one another and to the earth.

Together, we are resilient and resourceful enough to say "yes" to that call, to make it our life's work in a thousand different ways, knowing that we can do no other than bind ourselves more tightly together, and throw ourselves into the holy work of showing up, again and again, to be part of building that world of which we dream but which we have not yet seen.

Go out, persevering in peace and love. Amen.

## EXTINGUISHING THE FLAME

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<sup>6</sup> Perseverance, 91%

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.uua.org/worship/words/meditation/holy-work-showing>