



UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

“Keep Calm and Carry On,”
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson
on November 18, 2012

Two weeks ago, just before the election, I mentioned Rabbi Edwin Friedman, who observed that we live in a chronically anxious society. The election just amplified this--all that negativity reflected how serious and humorless people under stress can be. It revealed our tendency to group with those we agree with, and to blame others, and it reflected our unrealistic desire for leaders who can be all things to all people.

It's good that the election is behind us. But our culture hasn't stopped being anxious. The truth is, this is the water we swim in. And it's invisible, unless you step back and pay attention. Someone cuts you off in traffic, and what do you do? Listen to talk radio or watch cable news, and most of what you hear is that the world is going to hell and some person or group is to blame. The day after Thanksgiving, thousands of people will line up before dawn to get into Black Friday sales, and in some instances people will push and shove and even trample one another to get what they want.

There are so many opportunities to get anxious or upset. It would be easy to just blame the culture, as if we have nothing to do with it. But we are part of the culture. And it seems to be part of the human condition to worry, to fret, to freak out, even. Next Thursday, in kitchens all across America, there will be people getting anxious about whether the turkey is going to defrost, or if it's going to be overdone and dry. How do you make gravy anyway? Do you know there are hotlines to call if you are in a panic about your Thanksgiving turkey?

One of the things that gets talked about in divinity school is the importance of being a “non-anxious presence.” When things are tense, it helps to have someone who can say, “It's going to be ok,” or “We've been through things like this before,” or even, “It could be worse!” This doesn't mean, when things are bad, avoiding the hard truth. If all is not well, I will tell you. More often, my job is to ask, “Is this worth getting worked up about?” Because the truth is, getting anxious about something usually doesn't help.

Of course, being a non-anxious presence is something we could all work on. You teachers and nurses, you work in stressful settings and people depend on you to bring calm and confidence to anxious times and places. I suspect all of us can think of situations where what was needed was someone to be a calming presence. Parents of younger children, and teenagers too, you know about this. Where my kids took driver's ed, there was a handout for parents, with helpful hints to

make those white-knuckle moments with your kid behind the wheel a little easier for everyone. Things like, familiarize your teenager with the controls and explain what you mean, don't assume they understand what you are thinking, give directions clearly and well in advance. The handbook says "a soft, steady voice is most helpful--remain clam!"

We loved that typo, "Remain clam!" It became a catch phrase in our house, at least among the parents. The teenagers tended to roll their eyes.

You've probably seen the poster that's on the cover of our order of service today, or maybe you've seen some of the many parodies of it. The story is, back in 1939, as Nazi Germany was moving across Europe, the British government created a series of posters to bolster people's spirits when war came. They expected heavy bombing, gas attacks and even invasion, and needed to help the British people prepare for what lay ahead. They wanted to foster courage and resilience in the face of fear and peril. The "Keep Calm" poster was held in reserve, to be distributed in the event of a crisis or invasion. But it never saw the light of day--for whatever reason, it was never made public.

Fifty years later, the owners of an English bookstore found a folded-up copy of this poster in a box of used books they bought at auction. They liked the poster, and put it up in their shop. Enough people expressed interest in it that they reproduced the poster and soon it spread far and wide.

It seems ironic, doesn't it, that in the middle of a world war against Fascism, this poster was kept in reserve because the British government never quite thought it was needed; but clearly it's struck a nerve and found a wide following in these anxious times? "Keep Calm and Carry On." Who among us doesn't need to be reminded of that? Just to be clear, I'm not talking about the kind of anxiety that needs a doctor's treatment. If you suffer from that, please be sure to seek medical help.

People say that coming here helps them get through the week. That makes me glad. Gathering here with others, does help remind you of what matters, attunes you to that quiet voice within that says, "Come what may, all shall be well." Over the ages religions have developed ways to help people be centered and grounded so they can see past their present troubles and be open to that which is always More--whether you think that More is the human spirit or the holy spirit or the blessings of this good earth; or, all of these.

The Buddhist tradition has long understood that meditation is good for the body, mind and spirit. Yoga in this country is seen primarily as a way to exercise, but it began as a spiritual discipline in ancient India, and if you've ever practiced yoga, you know that it has that quality about it. Five times a day, Muslims stop what they are doing to pray. I often wonder, how would our common life in this country be different if everyone stopped to pray or meditate or practice yoga, even just once or twice a day?

Pablo Neruda imagined something like this in his poem, "Keeping Quiet," which begins

Now we will count to twelve

and we will all keep still.

This one time upon the earth,
let's not speak any language,
let's stop for one second,
and not move our arms so much.

When you do this, you touch a different place, a deeper place, than the anxious one all of us inhabit some of the time. The truth is, we have a choice about how we will engage with the world. We can't control what happens to us or those we love, but we do have a choice about how we respond.

In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus keeps telling his disciples, "be not afraid." Whether they are out on a stormy sea of Galilee or learning that following a prophet is dangerous, Jesus tells them to have faith. He sees the opposite of faith not as doubt, but fear. "Why are you afraid?," he asks, "Have you still no faith?" (Mark 4:40).

I have to confess that, in the more anxious moments of my ministry, I haven't always channeled Jesus. No, the image that can come to my mind is from the movie that's a classic of sophomoric humor, "Animal House." There's a scene at the end, when the homecoming parade has gone completely awry, and there's pandemonium in the streets. A young Kevin Bacon, wearing a ROTC uniform, stands there, shouting "Remain Calm! All is well!" I can relate. Sometimes that's what it feels like doesn't it, when all hell is breaking loose?

But good religion reminds us is that beyond the surface of things, beyond the trials and tribulations, the joys and sorrows of our lives, beyond all that is transitory, there is something more. The UU minister David Bumbaugh put it this way, he said "Beneath all of our diversity, and beyond all our differences, there is a unity which makes us one, and binds us forever together in spite of time, death, and the space between the stars."

Some of us imagine that unity as God or Spirit, and others as the human community or this blue green planet Earth or the universe itself. The point is, we are part of something larger than ourselves. Good things happen, and bad things happen, beyond our ability to control. What should we do? Keep calm, and carry on.

Keep calm by doing things that help you to remember who you are and whose you are. The psalm we heard this morning says, "Be still and know that I am God." The Buddhist tradition puts it this way: "No matter how many winds are blowing, no matter how many clouds are swirling, no matter how many lions are prowling, be intimate with everything and sit like a mountain." Buddhist teacher Sharon Salzberg talks about equanimity as "a spacious stillness of mind that allows us to be with things as they simply are."

You need ways, when times are tough, to settle yourself down and remember what's most important, to "be still and know," as the psalmist said. I hope you have practices that help you to do this. And if you don't, check out our meditation groups on Sunday and Monday night, or try

lectio divina before church on the 4th Sunday of the month, or come to Vespers, starting next Wednesday. Or talk to me, if you're interested in developing a prayer or meditation practice. We can offer a Spiritual Exploration class on that, if people are interested.

This week, across our country, families and friends will gather on Thursday for the simple act of giving thanks. Some will give thanks for food or a job or a loved one home from the war. Some will give thanks for the joy of being together, even as they remember those who are no longer in their midst. Some will give thanks that they are still alive, part of the human family on this good earth. We gather on Thursday to count our blessings and to give thanks. To be reminded of what matters.

So if there is someone at your Thanksgiving celebration who pushes your buttons, remember that you can choose to keep calm. If the turkey isn't perfect, don't worry. People will still enjoy it. And there's always dessert!

Faced with the gravest threat of the twentieth century, the indomitable British people held in reserve a secret weapon, their resolve to "Keep calm and carry on." We can't control all that happens in this this life. But we do have a choice about how we will respond. Keep calm, not as an escape from the cares of this world, but in order to engage more deeply with it. Keep calm and carry on, and all shall be well.

Happy Thanksgiving, and amen.