

The Cavalry: It ain't coming.

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I was going to talk to you about grief. I was going to talk to you about mourning. I was going to ask you to give each other time and space, and to, like the Rabbit, simply listen to each other. I'm still going to ask you to do that, but I'm also going to ask you to listen to what I'll be telling you.

We've made it to another milestone that can, after the moment passes, feel kinda meaningless these days. There's that 'held breathe' moment, then a gentle exhale as we realize that the very worst outcomes have been avoided. Maybe, like a lot of us, you don't quite believe and you're still waiting for the other shoe to drop. Maybe this moment brings you relief, maybe it brings you joy.

But our daily lives haven't changed much. We're still separated from friends and family. I have library books to return a country away from eleven months back, to a library that hasn't opened its doors in ages. My students attended their first semester of university from around the world over the internet, and they're just about to start up again for the spring; I've never met them in person, and given the way our lives are all shaking out, probably never will meet most of them.

This past year, these past few years have been so rough. It can feel like misery is the rule. The shifting of norms, the loss of lives from both the pandemic and from political - and especially racial - violence, systemic and direct. I could list other things...waiting with bated breathe to hear back from friends in DC that they were ok, that feeling while waiting on a COVID test, waiting while hearing sirens go past, waiting for friends or family to post bail after a protest where they were arrested- because they'd showed up for something other than white supremacy- , waiting for election results, waiting waiting waiting waiting...

But hey. We, who have gathered together at this moment, have made it to this day. The chaotic forces of the universe that brought us into existence have sustained us for long enough to reach this moment.

We have made it through so many hurdles, and we've finally stumbled into a place that feels like we can breathe a bit. Not that everything is better, but we can finally take a moment to sit, just for a bit.

Hey. We made it.

That said- Dad, feel like reading the offering?

Misery's the River of the World

Ok. Back to where I was- we made it.

And everything is going to be fine, right?

I'm joking. Things are still hard. In fact, this week might be one of the harder ones for a lot of us.

I don't know about you, but that's usually when it hits me.

I spent years working in DC, with the military. When you do that kind of work, you end up hearing a lot of combat stories about this stress reaction. The usual story goes something like this: "no shit, there I was." A guy gets hurt in an explosion or fire fight. However as it's happening, he feels completely fine; he is busy responding to the event, checking on his people, all the things he knows he has to do. It is only once he has completed his checklist, that he can relax. That's when his body notices he's been hit. It is only after the moment is over, that he begins to bleed.

It can feel like an over-the-top metaphor. But that's where a lot of us are at right now. We've made it through a really grim time. Many of us know people who didn't make it, or there was something big in the past year, the past few years that we've missed, because we've been so busy trying to hold back a flood of terrible things. We can finally breathe. There is space to mourn what was lost, and space to rejoice at what remains- and even gained. When we are flooded with adrenaline, living moment to moment, day to day, we can feel less deeply. It is only when we have the time to sit and think that everything hits us. We can finally (metaphorically at least) bleed, and physically breathe. And so maybe we should.

We have to take time to acknowledge everything that's been lost; lives, hope, progress towards a just world. We're not just mourning what we've lost, but what we could have had. The way our standards have dropped, to the point where 'a peaceful transition' that wasn't so peaceful, is something we feel relieved about. Time we've missed out on. Progress and democratic processes that should have been. Events we've missed out on, both good and bad. Some of these things we haven't missed, so much as changed to accommodate our current circumstances. Misery surrounds us. It can feel like the rule.

Things are not going to feel better just because there are handful of changes underway.

More importantly, things are not going to *be* better just because there are a handful of changes underway. There is no cavalry coming to fix things.

The steps we've seen taken in the past week are worthy of celebration. But a return to complacency is unacceptable. The inequality we've seen exacerbated by the current circumstances is only going to get worse. Misery can feel like the river of the world. If we don't work together, we might drift along with it.

Devon Spier, a rabbinical scholar and poet writes:

Kindness is not "Power Over"
Care is not letting
only the powerful choose
And anger is, indeed, a spiritual practice

You'll hear this again today. These days, we need kindness, not niceness. We need care, not complacency. And we need anger- not the flash of rage that made you kick rocks when you were younger (or even some of us, perhaps more passionate or immature, as adults), but the low burning embers that whisper that change is not just possible, but vital. These things can fuel us and sustain us through. It is the combination of feelings and emotion that together keeps us human and invested.

Life keeps moving ahead, even in these strange times, and in that spirit, I'd like to ask you to share your joys and concerns.

The Cavalry: It's already here.

The inauguration happened, and some policy changes are afoot. But the pandemic is still here. Police brutality is still here. ICE raids separating families keep happening. The vicious political violence coming from our very neighbors and perhaps family members is still here. And nobody from the outside is going to swoop in to rescue us.

Watching old Western movies, there's a moment when all hope seems lost, but the cavalry suddenly crests over the hill, and we know that everything will be alright. But I'm going to be honest here. The cavalry isn't coming.

A common refrain of the past few years to counteract hopelessness is "look for the helpers." Mr. Rogers, a great religious scholar and saint of our times, was right, but he was also talking to children. If you're a child, then you should absolutely look for the helpers. But you can also do what I'm going to ask the adults to do.

I hope you have your camera running right now, because good news, y'all.

You can see some of the helpers right now. Big and little, old and young. The cavalry isn't coming, but that's ok. We are our own cavalry. We are our neighbor's cavalry. There is nobody coming. And that's ok. We're already here.

There is no outside help. Tom Waits would sing-speak to you that "Misery is the River of the World", "so everybody row." This is not a cry of despair but rather one of empowerment. Nobody is going to give you the mandate to fix things; you are not going to be assigned the task from a boss or a teacher. It's more like a potluck sign up. Maybe you can't bring the macaroni salad; maybe you have some napkins in your car. Maybe you can help wash the dishes or greet people at the door. Misery is the river of the world that we can see, but that means we need all hands on-deck. Everybody who can row, should.

There are tasks to do. And they need people who are willing to actually get to work.

- Keeping our communities fed; you have done an amazing job with things like the Takery. We can advocate for access to healthy food, and enough for everyone in our communities, by helping out directly, and by demanding that things like SNAP and EBT are properly funded. Keeping the earth healthy and cared for so that we and all other creatures on it can continue to enjoy the bounty provided.
- Keeping our communities healthy: getting medical care for all of us, making sure that we all have access to clean and safe places to be outside. Listening to what JoAnn has said about vaccinations and helping our neighbors who might need help with access.
- Keeping our communities welcoming: making sure that immigrants and refugees are welcome, making sure that queer people of all sexualities and gender expressions can feel like they belong.
- Making sure our community is properly broad; it doesn't end at the border. My students stretched across four continents this year. They are a community, with all the banter and bickering that small community brings. As a former NatSec analyst, I would submit that the greatest act of national security is recognizing that the security of our people – of the whole species – doesn't stop when you get to Canada, Mexico, or elsewhere.
- Keeping our communities safe: eliminating police violence, eliminating the tacit support racial violence has had from the government and our own silence and complicity, making sure that sexual and gendered violence and rape culture are dismantled. Making sure that white supremacy of the kind pushed by the imbeciles storming the gates of the Capitol is shutdown where it starts. Maybe for you that means working to deplatform people who are pushing for hate, maybe it means calling in your relatives when they say things that are harmful. Maybe it means showing up bodily, if you have a body that is viewed as white and delicate. (To all the white women in the audience, this is something we can do for our Black and Brown community members- we are viewed as delicate in a way that they are not. It can be scary, and it can be dangerous, but if you have the strength and fortitude, I beg you, mask up and get

your butts out there. To all the white men- you have what Patrick Stewart once called a very helpful superpower- you have a position and privilege that other white men will listen. Use it for good. Call out white supremacy whenever you can.)

These aren't the only tasks; you may have dozens bubbling in the back of your mind, and it can feel overwhelming.

You aren't responsible for every little thing; you don't have to do it all; you don't have to complete it on your own. That's when we back each other up. Remember, the cavalry isn't coming. It's already here.

Today we can take the time to breathe and to mourn what should have been and what we've lost; we absolutely should. Tomorrow, too, for that matter. And the day after that, and after that, and until the grief turns from grief to good grief. But that doesn't change what needs to get done, and we can mourn as we work. The world can be a better place; but that's only if we bother to make it that way. Misery's the River of the World. It's time to get to rowing.