

**The Thing with Feathers**  
 First Parish UU of Medfield – 11 Dec 2016  
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Saturday morning television when I was 10 or 12 years old was unencumbered by adult supervision. My younger brother and I would park in front of “Tarzan,” with Johnny Weissmuller. We watched “Sky King.” In between was a documentary slot for boyhood dreams like rocket sleds, the X-15 and land speed records at Bonneville. I learned the jingle for Paul Parrot shoes, which I can still sing – but I will spare you.

I think it was “Jungle Jim” – another Weissmuller studio safari into “Darkest Africa” – that taught me about quicksand. When you step into quicksand, here’s what *not* to do: Don’t count on the manly hero just happening by – unless you’re the heroine. Don’t lunge up and down and wave your arms – that will be glug, glug and goodbye.

How to actually escape? Lie flat on your back to distribute your weight and “swim” your way to firm ground. Unless you are the dastardly villain, it works. I always felt well prepared for any quicksand I might encounter around suburban Philadelphia.

Actual quicksand is not common in the world. It is, however, very often encountered in life. The muck of adversity comes up over our shoes. What previously seemed reliable – our health, our job, our relationships, our car that starts on cold mornings – are all aspects of human *terra firma* known to turn wobbly. This is not the thunderclap of disaster. It is more a negative trend we properly describe as a “sinking feeling.” Things seem to be “going to hell in a hand basket,” as my mother used to say.

Congregations experience quicksand, according to church experts. This is not a fire or an act of violence or theft. It is a sense the community is – like the infamous political polling – “heading in the wrong direction.” These are some warning flags:

- The ways people belong to the community seem to become less clear and less certain; the sense of connection may feel less fulfilling and satisfactory;
- Communication seems less effective; things said are not always heard; things needing to be said are not always spoken, or not where they need to be;
- Making decisions for the group gets harder; feeling unheard or second-guessed becomes too common to support the trusting relationships of shared governance;
- The role of the professional clergy may be challenged from diffuse directions, which makes appropriate responses harder to formulate and less satisfactory.

These signals of anxiety may sound familiar. I dare say you have experienced them, which is painful and a disappointment. I want to reassure you they are a normal turn of the wheel. In the lifetime of any congregation there are natural cycles. The body of the church itself is born, matures and declines. Congregations seldom die, but a church fight can leave them dark stars, bereft of the energy to provide more than a glimmer of mere survival. The blunt term is, “burying each other.” Those shocking words have a purpose – to remind us this is a fate you do not want for your church.

How to avoid it begins with understanding this is indeed what happens if we don't make happen something different. The foundational book on congregational life cycles is called, Taking Your Church to the Next Level. The subtitle is right to the point: “What got you here, won't get you there.” Cycles are inevitable; what we do about them is a choice. Somewhere in the maturity of a congregation, it can choose to renew itself rather than decline. Any church can do this – best to arrest decline before it sets in.

Plateaus are also normal church cycles – periods of consolidation, or rest even, of discernment that should precede a new direction. The danger is when they turn into drift. To avoid drift, embrace transition. Choose a time to get ready leading to a time of new vitality. “This too shall pass,” is Biblical wisdom for when things are not going well. It is equally good to remember we have the power to help this happen. We are going from here to somewhere different – that's a transition. It's a good thing to make.

The congregation is always in its current cycle rather than some earlier one. Without assuming the earlier ones have gone away – they never do – each of us must be opening up to the ways in which the cycles of our lives and the opportunities of our congregational life are moving into alignment. What you *want* may still be coming into focus; what you *dream of* may still be preparing to appear. It should be this way for all of us, all of the time. In an ideal world, what we want and what we dream of would always be going on simultaneously, both leading and guiding us. They would be linked by *what we are making happen*, or gathering the energy to make happen, in an endless cycle of renewal. We would see ourselves as protean creators, even on the days we rest.

“The darkness around us is deep,” as William Stafford put it in a poem read earlier this year, but he reminds us we are not “following the wrong god home.” We will not “miss our star,” as long as we are willing to know the kind of people we are and stay properly attentive “to the parade of our mutual life.” What a memorable phrase!

This that is right here in front of us – this *parade* – is what we have charge of. We are not immune to history, or outside it. But this little corner of history belongs to us. We have the capacity to know well what we have inherited. We can be skilled and dedicated to shape the best present that is within our power. We can be inspired and faithful to the needs of those who will come after us. Small things these may be in the larger scheme, but they are our possession, our responsibility and our opportunity.

They are the hope perched within us.

We don't forget about the quicksand. When we do step into it, the situation carries some urgency. We can't stand there; we can't wait for somebody else to solve the problem. We can't whistle past the graveyard and expect some other day to work out an answer. Experts recommend this focus: What will be missing if we stay the same?

That is an opening to perceive opportunity, not loss. What calls out profoundly to our spiritual selves, individually and in community? What is indeed “perched in our souls”? If we get caught up in “fixing” things, we'll never know. There's no use changing a flat tire if the oil is low. You won't get far. No mission to the future can get under way without a comprehensive long-term strategy – not on a flipchart, but in our hearts.

Unlike quick and delusional fixes, plans take time. They call for patience as well as vision. We have to be willing to live in some tension and uncertainty, to sit close enough to the fire to feel the heat – and succeed. We can do that by actively helping each other – community is as community does. That sacred promise – that covenant – starts with accepting responsibility for ourselves. Don't be afraid to change your whole point of view – being horizontal is something the mind won't naturally embrace, but you can go there. Spread out – the wider the effort the better the results. Paddle, for Pete's sake – nothing is going to happen otherwise, and you will only be wet and muddy that much longer. Repeat as often as needed: There is firm ground out there somewhere and we will find it. Quicksand is scary but it is not forever – unless we let it be.

Remember this first and last: The thing with feathers called *hope* – “it never stops at all.” It perches in your soul and mine – and certainly in the soul we share. Hear in your heart the closing line: “Yet, never, in extremity/It asked a crumb of me.” Emily Dickinson's hope is perched in the soul of the eternal. That's why it is always there for us. In a season of hope, let us be unafraid to name our hopes – and follow them home.

Amen. Blessed Be. Shalom. Salaam.