

We need sanctuary now more than ever. There many parts to a physical sanctuary - a foundation, a roof, and frames which are needed to hold the roof up as well as the walls. The frames must be settled firmly enough in the foundation, but connected to something much higher and beyond the foundation. It is difficult to discern which frames you need until you have a foundation you can trust.

My grandmother grew up in rural Arkansas, in tornado alley. She told me a story numerous times about a tornado that completely destroyed her home. She told me how her and her parents went to hide in a cellar, and how the wooden door blew off, leaving them completely exposed. She said they just held one another - her sisters and brothers, her parents, even their pet dog. They just held one another as my grandmother described the whirring sound of destruction which sounded like a freight train.

I've talked with many people over the last week that feel like they've been hit by a freight train. Pain and outrage over the latest Supreme Court appointment on top of many other disturbing and traumatizing events.

It's as if we thought we were cynical enough, but there seems to be no end to how bad things may become, at least in our immediate vision. This is already on top of the difficulties that we face just as persons trying to adjust to our lives, with it's own poignant sadness and desire for some kind of relief.

My grandmother told me the story of the tornado more than once, and like many young people, I mostly dismissed the story as having nothing to do with my actual life. It seemed very much my grandmother's story, not mine. I remember thinking to myself - "I live in Oregon. I don't ever have to worry about tornados." I even was a bit judgemental. I remember thinking: "You must not be very intelligent choosing to live in a place called tornado alley." Lo and behold, little did I know, that I would one day live in Tulsa, OK. Jennifer and I were skyping with friends of ours from Oregon, describing the great people we had met and the wondrous things we saw near Tulsa, including a herd of over a thousand wild bison. We were bragging about how great our experience had been, when Jennifer glances at her phone and sees a tornado warning.

It said you have 13 minutes to seek cover before a tornado hits Tulsa. I didn't believe it at first. I went outside, and it was quiet...really quiet. There weren't even any bird noises. Then I looked up at the sky and it was this unusual green color. And then the wind started picking up pace...coming right out of that quiet. I rushed back inside, and we put both our cats in carriers, and we sat together in our hallway. We didn't have a tornado shelter, so we just sat together trying to calm our cats that were freaking out. Then I heard it. The wind had picked up over 60 mph and there was now lightning. I thought of my grandmother and the freight train.

Many of us are kind of like that. We don't really have a sanctuary. We've heard that things can be difficult, really difficult, but we might not have taken this seriously. At least not seriously enough to begin considering our sanctuary options. We just do the best we can and hope for the best.

A spiritual sanctuary serves the purpose of giving us rest, and inspiring commitment. It helps us commit to living our lives as fully as possible with the time we have left.

In order to commit to this consistently, one must feel safe, and know when to rest. A sanctuary nurtures trust as well.

What can we trust? This is the big question of this moment as our politics continually demonstrate it's rampant untrustworthiness. There seems to be a drastic shift occurring in the general public that is beginning to seriously question the foundations we thought we knew. Even if we knew that the foundations were mostly untrustworthy, there seems to be at this moment an unveiling of how deep that untrustworthiness is and many are unprepared for its depths.

The theologian Paul Tillich, after World War II described a shaking of the foundations occurring in American culture. I think we are in a moment now of discovering our foundations. The foundations are different than we'd expect. Perhaps we imagined the foundations to be our values - goodness, courage, hope, love.

We are awakening to a different kind of foundation, a foundation that is perhaps always been there but had been glossed over. I'll give you a hint at what I think this foundation is - it sounds an awful lot like a freight train.

I think we are coming to awareness that difficulty, struggle, unexpected and unearned tragedy are deep and strong. It is persistent, and we are beginning to take this seriously as a culture.

This is no time for a casual faith because the times we are living in are anything but casual. Without difficulty and struggle, there is no purpose to sanctuary. We simply wouldn't need it. I think this difficulty and struggle is the foundation, the literal ground we stand on, as we imagine a newer and more real faith. The foundation may be difficult to accept, and many of us may feel so intimidated by the sheer persistence and power of difficulty, that we abandon it. It becomes like one of these many lots in Youngstown with grass and weeds growing without any care. I think we all do this at some point. I know I have. This is not the foundation we wanted. It maybe wasn't the foundation that was taught to us by our parents, by our schools, or our churches, and we're taken off guard. We don't know what to do with it.

Not knowing is a very creative place to be in. In fact I think it's essential.

I was having a conversation a few years ago with one of my mentors, and I was telling him that I feel like everywhere I look I see tragedy. I see personal tragedy. I see civic tragedy. I see cultural tragedy. He told me, "It's good you see that. That will serve you well. Just don't let tragedy have the last word." I asked how do I do that? He said, "Just like me you'll spend the rest of our life practicing that." It may not sound like it, but that was really encouraging. I didn't need to have the answer. I could spend the rest of my life doing what I could to not let tragedy have the last word. I haven't found a better definition of ministry, really what it means to live a human life. Doing what we can to not let tragedy have the last word.

But we must be intimate with the tragedy first, even if it overcomes us with grief and sorrow from time to time. That just proves we're human, that we feel, that we have a heart. But we don't stop at tragedy. That is just the foundation, the pervasive unending difficulty is where we plant our hopes, our love, our appreciation of beauty. It's time to put new frames up.

Grounded in the difficulty of this moment, we can trust that difficulty as the bedrock for our response, which begins with a new frame to construct something healing and empowering. We have no idea how long our frames will last, and in a way that's none of our business. We can trust the next generation to build new frames, if need be, grounded in the same struggle we inherited. Or we could be completely surprised, and our commitment to putting up one new frame could inspire strangers to take part in building sanctuary with us and in lands far away.

We shall overcome is a song that originated in the painful and bloody struggle of the civil rights movement here in America. Since it was first constructed on this soil it has been sung across the world in various contexts to honor both our suffering and our capacity to come together and create something beautiful. When the Berlin Wall fell in 1989, they sang "We shall overcome." During the democracy movement in Tiananmen square, they also sang "we shall overcome." We sing it today to honor those who have heard the freight train. We sing for those who have come before. We sing it for ourselves. Beyond despair come the words that turn the fire of suffering into commitment - we shall overcome.