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UU Fellowship of the Eastern Slopes
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Expecting the Unexpected

I love stories.

This is the true story of Joel.

Joel Ben Izzy was a young professional storyteller in his thirties with two adorable children and the wife of his dreams living with gratitude for everything he had. One morning he was struck by a pain in his foot – his toe to be exact – that required a visit to his doctor, cancelling the show he was scheduled to perform – Oh bad fortune.

Gout was the easy diagnosis, with a single, simple medication for its management. Oh – good fortune.

While at the doctor's, a brief physical unveiled a lump on his thyroid gland that required surgery for cancer – Cancer? OHHHHH Bad Fortune. Ah, but the good news after the surgery was that he would likely be cancer free - Good fortune!! but a complication to his vocal cords had caused him to lose his voice. OHHHH – he earns his living as a story teller!!! BAD fortune. Have you ever felt yourself on a similar see-saw?

I have my own list of life changing events that might be characterized as good or bad fortune – and I suspect you do too.

One common trait of these events is that they are largely not of our own doing. Rather, we are going along living life when either Lady Luck or some dastardly force intervenes and we are either dancing for unexpected joy or weeping with the shock of loss. Loss of someone, some capability, some assumption about how we live and what we expected or counted on. If it is good fortune, we tend not to examine it too closely. If it is bad fortune we tend to search for “meaning and answers.”

Last December I was eagerly looking forward to meeting with you to talk about my Advent plans. Four days before my scheduled Sunday with you, however, while showing my 10-year-old friend Sebastian the “safe” route to take on his bicycle to school, I veered on my bike around a lady with her nicely behaved dog, fell and shattered my lower leg and spent the next 4 months non-weight bearing with a walker. I also experienced constant nerve pain all over my lower leg – like shingles or a sleeve of cactus. I got through this long winter but not without anguish and deeply discouraging days. I just wanted to hibernate – sleep through it and come out healed.

Joel, our storyteller, fought his circumstance. For months, he was whispering harshly, struggling with throaty, coarse murmurings, desperately trying to be heard to no avail. His voice was not coming back despite his efforts.

During another unexpected event, he encountered his old, cantankerous, alcoholic but wise mentor, Lenny. Painfully and slowly Joel recounted what had happened to his voice. When he finished, Lenny challenged Joel to keep going – he said the story wasn't over. Joel needed to keep going until the story had a point. Lenny was saying - it wasn't finished. This response wasn't the sympathy and comfort Joel wanted. Frustrated and angry, Joel left Lenny's but was determined to find the answer to his Why Me? question – day after day, weeks on end– but it wouldn't come. – One day, finally in frustration, he simply gave up. He stopped trying to talk or whisper or make something happen. He stopped and he started listening. Deeply listening. To the street sounds, to the night creatures, to his children, to silence.

I'm going to turn to another story for a minute, the Genesis story of the Garden of Eden and Adam and Eve's great fall. We often get caught up with the snake, the apple, the shame of nakedness and their being thrown out of the garden by an angry God. None of that interests me personally. But what does, is that the Fall comes because they ate from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. They became the human judges of Good or Evil. They frankly became forever entwined in the labeling of events as Good fortune or Bad fortune – when in absolute reality – we have no earthly idea of what is good or bad because the story isn't over yet!

Like we learn from the story of the old Chinese Farmer, until we get to the end – the final end – when there is no more story – we can only accept where we are, accept the facts as we know them and hang on while we are challenged to keep our hands upturned and ears and eyes open for what comes. If we can tame our minds to stay open even during the darkest moments to the possibility of a future that will help complete the story, we might find, that we have been given gifts and opportunities.

Back to Joel – and a spoiler alert – Just as Joel began to find joy in actively and intently listening, he learned his mother had been hospitalized for end stage lung cancer and had little time to live. Bad Fortune. He flew to LA to be by her side. The mantra between them had always been – no sad stories – and she loved to hear him tell stories. This time, though, Joel was not going to be telling her stories to cheer her up, the roles were reversed and he was ready to actively listen.

Giving her his full attention and prompting, he got his mother to tell him the stories – ALL of the stories - of his immigrant Jewish grandparents, their nightmares and demons, their struggles that got passed on to his parents. He learned about his father's desperate struggle with illnesses and depression that he worked so hard to cover up. AS his mother talked, unleashing information that had been tightly held down for decades, she became animated and laughed. When she finished, they held each other tight and tears of joy flowed between them.

When misfortune hits –We might bear our suffering like a Buddhist. But it is easier for most of us to scream to the gods. We can cry out with anguish and true mourning because we often need to because we are hurting, badly. That is part of our experience. I used to say when I lost someone – if they hadn't made me feel so wonderful, it wouldn't hurt so much. We have strong feelings but that doesn't mean something is good or bad. We have to try to avoid over-s interpreting our feelings.

In my own 4 months of the early recovery, I experienced constant chronic pain, immobility, dependence, loss of energy, focus and confidence. Despite a remarkable group of friends that I relied on, I was often isolated and lost my purpose. It was a very cold and dark and endless winter. Yet in the darkest days came unexpected gifts – discoveries I would never have made in my usual mad dash of a life.

I learned the restorative power of naps. I learned to slow my pace to the pace of my frail 98-year-old mother. I realized that I need to plan for a future of dependence and will want and need to live in congregate spaces to protect against isolation. Above all, I was pushed to practice acceptance without judgment.

In the months to come, when I get more mobile I might speed up again. I hope I don't forget the lessons of acceptance and not over-interpreting. Not every event is good or bad. It might just be. Like the Chinese farmer, we won't know what is good or bad fortune until the very end of the story.

I am trying now, not to eat of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good or Evil but eat of the Tree of Life. Human Life. My life. I won't know what is good or bad until the end of the story. It is still being written. Chapter by chapter. That is how a story – a great story gets told. It has its characters and its tangled plots and its suspense, its crazy twists and turns. I believe, if we listen to the story of the Lost Horse, and witness what happened to Joel, and accept the turns in our own lives, we will understand that what seems like a blessing might be a curse and what seems like a curse just might be a blessing. May we all help each other to be grateful and rejoice in the full living of our lives wholly and without judgment until the very very end.