

THE DESERT AS SACRED TEACHER: LEARNING TO DO HARD THINGS

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Well, good evening again, everyone. My talk tonight is "The Desert as Sacred Teacher: Learning to Do Hard Things."

So, this is my second spring and the desert. We moved last year, February of 2024. So, we went through last spring and now this spring. And I'm once again just noticing how amazing the desert is with the cacti blooming; the trees are scattering their confetti all over the ground; the cool nights; lots of javelinas enjoying our neighborhood right now. And especially, for the first time, I saw the little baby javelinas ... adorable! I know not to touch them, but adorable!

So as I was looking at a cactus recently, I was just really struck at how beautiful the blossoms are that emerge from this really tough prickly plant. Like, how does that happen? And I was thinking, *"Wow! If a cactus can do that, then we, too, can do hard things. Like the cactus, we too can persevere and we can bloom!"*

So, the desert has survived millions of years of extremes, right? Drought and flood ... And, so, there's so much that we can learn from it. And so, as I reflected upon it, I came to realize five spiritual lessons that emerged for me that I thought I would share with all of you.

The first being **WE CAN DO HARD THINGS.**

Another being **WE CAN TAKE AS MUCH TIME AS WE NEED TO GROW.**

A third being **IT'S OKAY TO CRY WHEN THINGS GET HEATED.**

A fourth is **WE ARE ADAPTABLE AND RESILIENT.**

And lastly, that reminder that ... the desert's night sky, it reminds us that **WE'RE PART OF SOMETHING BIGGER.** We're part of something bigger and greater.

And it all started from seeing the cacti in my neighborhood suddenly sprouting these buds on top of their heads. It kind of looks like a pimple, right? [Congregants laugh] I was looking at it and I'm like, *"It kind of looks like a teenager with, like, the pimples coming out."* And yet, from that kind of weird, mangly, teenager-y look, right? Then this beautiful flower comes forth!

So, just think about how tough and spiny that cactus plant is, and yet these blossoms work through the hard skin and awkward teenage stage to reveal this beauty.

And so, the blooming cacti can be a metaphor for spiritual transformation. That, despite its harsh exterior, beauty emerges. It doesn't wait for comfort; it doesn't wait for perfect conditions; it simply lives and thrives and eventually blooms. Likewise, we blossom ... not *despite* hardship, but often *because* of the hardships and challenges that life presents us.

Author Glennon Doyle was the one who popularized the phrase, **we can do hard things.** And she writes, *"The journey is learning that pain, like love, is simply something to surrender to."* She says, *"It's a holy space we can enter with people only if we promise not to tidy up."* I think that goes for ourselves, as well as others.

So being challenged sometimes in painful ways can -- if we open ourselves up; if we allow ourselves to -- can be part of a greater transformation: a source of great spiritual growth. And we don't have to tidy ourselves up; we can just accept that we're imperfectly perfect. The desert doesn't tidy itself up. The

blossoms fall; those trees keep dropping their confetti leaves all over our cars and our yards and our roads, right? Without apology ... just does it because it just is.

And so, we too, can be both beautiful and growing while untidy. It doesn't have to look perfect; we don't have to be perfect. We can do all the blooming and all the growing in an untidy way.

And the reminder also that life can be hard, not because -- and I want to make sure you hear this -- not because you're not doing it right or because you're doing it wrong, but because life is hard. And that's something that we learn from the desert and nature itself. The cacti show us that. The desert certainly shows us that: that life can just be hard sometimes. You're not doing it wrong. Sometimes we need to give ourselves some grace.

So, love yourself through it all. Love others as they go through their tough moments of blossoming, as well. And the best thing that we can do is to not offer advice, but instead to offer our presence, to offer our compassion, to offer our love ... again, both for ourselves and for other people.

And so that brings us to my next observation: that from the desert we can learn that **growth takes time**.

Cacti bloom only once a year, if at all. Some don't bloom at all! And yet, we expect ourselves to bloom constantly, even daily. We want perfection *now*. We want spiritual growth *now*. But spiritual growth doesn't work that way. Healing takes time. Learning takes time. Becoming takes time.

Even Unity's co-founder, Myrtle Fillmore, she spent two years healing herself of a lifetime of illness through daily prayer meditation. She was in daily prayer meditation for two years every day for two hours. For two hours for two years! You get what I'm saying? A long time! And yet we're thinking, *"Well, I said my affirmations all week; why am I not healed? I prayed every day; why didn't this miracle come?"* Right? It takes as long as it takes.

And so, what if we resist urgency culture and bloom at whatever pace is right for us? Embrace and honor your own unique paths. Honor however long it takes for you to learn whatever it is that you need to learn; whatever it is that you're healing.

You know, what is often not highlighted on our Instagram and Facebook feeds is that some people don't bloom until their sixties or seventies or eighties. Colonel Sanders of KFC didn't franchise until he was 62 years old. Laura Engel Wilder published the book *Little House on the Prairie* at the age of 65. Julia Child didn't attend culinary school until she was in her forties. I think she got her show when she was about 51. Grandma Moses began painting at 77. You know, she sold her last piece at the age of 101 for \$10,000. Yeah!

It's never too late to grow, to learn, or to follow a calling. To go after a new passion. To learn a new skill. So, whatever that stirring within you is -- the idea that you can't let go of, that divine guidance -- that *is* your divine guidance. So, listen to it. Allow it time to unfold. It's never too late to become more self-aware; to update your spiritual toolbox; to expand your consciousness and therefore expand your life.

And allow it to take as long as it takes. We don't need to rush it. We can listen to the cacti that says, *"I'll bloom when I want to bloom."*

And next the desert teaches us **adaptability**, right? The desert can be a desolate place. The original travelers ... I think I read the travelers that were coming out west, it was a lot ... don't quote me on this, but I think it was something like one in 10 didn't make it across the West here. I mean, it's a desolate place.

I remember when I worked for the Southwest Region of Unity Churches, and I'd have to drive from California to Arizona on the I-10 Freeway. And it's just desert. And it was like the desert treadmill, where

I'm like, *"Have I not seen that tumbleweed already? Did I not see that cactus already?"* Right? It can be very desolate. And yet, animals and plants and even humans survive.

So again, I turn to that question: How do the plants and animals survive here? What can we learn from them? What strategies do they use that we can maybe apply to our own lives? And so, here's what I found -- that the key to the success of the desert plant lies in three primal survival strategies: succulents, drought tolerance, and drought avoidance.

So, let's start with succulents. Succulents store water for dry times. Spiritually, we can look at this as: don't wait for a crisis to pray or meditate. Stay filled up through regular prayer and meditation and gratitude and connection. Often, we turn to meditation and prayer -- prayer -- especially when we're dry of our spiritual nourishment; when we've been drained of whatever hope we had; when we're tired and anxious. *Then* we usually turn to our prayer and meditation.

But this is that reminder that our spiritual survival happens when we consistently fill up our cup. When we keep ourselves spiritually full all the time so that, when those times happen, it doesn't deplete us. So don't wait for a drought or when you're desperate or grasping to pray or meditate. Do it when life is good! Do it consistently and do it when life is good. Keep yourself spiritually succulent. I just named that! [Congregants laugh] We're all going to keep ourselves spiritually succulent, right?

That second one was drought tolerance. So, of course, there's some plants that have drought tolerance, which means they have a deep root system that reaches down into the soil, accessing the underground water. Others have short leaves that help them during the dry periods to reduce the water loss.

In other words, we must have a strong foundation with our faith, with our spiritual practices, with spiritual community to allow our roots to grow deeply. And we need to be okay with letting go of what no longer serves us. Don't hang on to those situations or the individuals who energetically drain you. See, by letting go, by letting go, you become more resilient. You become more spiritually grounded. You don't have that other stuff weighing you down.

And then there's drought avoidance. So, these plants often have a short lifespan, because they rapidly germinate, grow, flower, produce seeds when moisture is available, and then retreat for the duration of the dry spell. In fact, I found this. Their seeds are often resistant to drying out and remain dormant in the soil until the next opportune time for growth. In other words, blooming when the time is right. And to be patient. Sometimes retreat is preparation for transformation.

And at the same time, be resistant to drying out, meaning: don't stop learning. Don't stop looking for new opportunities to grow. Whether it be, again, learning a new skill or becoming more self-aware for your own personal or spiritual growth; whether it be seeking new opportunities, you can push yourself past your comfort level to your growing edge.

So sometimes the wisest thing we can do is to rest, to gather ourselves, to wait. But not so long that we miss the opportunities to grow and thrive. So, it's a balance, yes? It's a balance of rest and wait and grow and thrive.

And here's something else. Both plants and desert animals survive by conserving water. Water is their life source. So, in other words, you don't have to give all of your energy away. In fact, it's good to conserve some. We tend to give all of ourselves; we give all of ourselves to other people, to work, to volunteering, until we're burnt out and resentful. And that doesn't serve anyone.

But the plants and the animals of the desert know: conserve. Bring your life force back to yourself. It's not selfish, it's actually spiritual and emotional maturity to pour your cup first, right? Put your mask on

first. You can't express your divine nature – you can't express your gifts; what you're here to do and be – if you give all of your energy away. So conserve.

And then the other part is to adapt. Desert animals survive by behavioral adaptations. So, remember: if life isn't working how you want life to work for you, then change. Change your thoughts; change your behaviors; change your habits. Adapt differently. You can't expect to manifest your dreams if you keep doing the same things, the same old thoughts, the same old habits.

Growth requires behavior changes that align with a new intention. If that's your intention, get into alignment, adapt, change, and get into alignment with it. So we, too, can learn to adapt for our personal and spiritual growth, just like the desert animals and plants.

And then there are the monsoons. Oh, those are amazing! So, I remember coming out in the '80s because I was in the YOU (Youth of Unity) program that Unity has for our high school congregants. And I was coming out to visit some of my friends in Arizona, and I saw my first monsoon. It was amazing, right? Just the skies open up and the lightning. And it's just ...

And then last spring we were here -- my husband, Juan, and I -- again, we were standing in our house just watching the rain come down. It's amazing! And it brings relief from the heat! And yet, then there's beautiful sunset usually ... which we have all the time anyway; some of the best sunsets. But especially after those rains, the sunlight coming off of the clouds.

So those monsoons roll in usually June through September, and here's what I learned. I learned that they're creative by shifts in wind. So, the shifts in the wind from the south, the moisture from the west, along with the heat from the Valley here, causes a rising air and pressure to build, which then causes a storm to occur.

So here's what we learn spiritually from this -- that life can give us winds of change: a change in a job status, a change in a health status, a change in a relationship status, big life decisions that have to happen. And then pressure builds up, and then an emotional storm occurs. Let the feelings come out. Let them spill out.

Tears water your soul like monsoon rains nourish the desert. This emotional release opens up space for fresh air and for a beautiful new perspective, for a new sunset. That water feeds the desert from the monsoon rains, just as your tears lighten your heart. And then that, in turn -- that lighter heart -- allows you to be emotionally and spiritually fed.

See, tears are sacred. Author Gerard Way said, "*Tears are words the heart can't express.*" Or as Deepak Chopra put it: "*Emotions are the language of the soul.*" Your feelings are guiding you. Your feelings are guiding you to where your soul wants you to be. It's an inner compass to guide you.

The fact is: you can't be open to divine ideas or expand consciousness if you're all filled up with steam. Right? We need to release the steam. So, tears and acknowledging our feelings are a way to honor our true self. It's a way to ... when we express our emotions, it's really an act of self-care, of self-love. So, let your emotions come forth. Let them cleanse you -- let them nourish you -- the way that the monsoon rains nourish the desert floor. Let your emotions out.

And finally, the desert offers the gift of the stillness, the silence, and perspective. We live in a dark skies neighborhood up in north Scottsdale. That means there's no lights. When I say there's no lights, I mean there's *no lights*. It's dark! But that also means there's not the light pollution. So, we can see so many stars!

So, when I'm sitting or walking in my quiet little oasis in the desert, I look up and I can see this expanse of space. And I can see all these stars. And I'm just in awe! And I'm reminded of our oneness. I'm

reminded how we belong to something bigger. We belong to something greater. And we belong to each other. That we're all woven together in a tapestry of collective consciousness.

And sitting in that dark desert evening sky, I can feel that power of the present moment. The power of the present moment. So often we're in the future; we're in the past. But to just sit and be with the present moment.

Psalms 46 says, "*Be still and know that I am God.*" Be still and know that I am here; I am good; I am present. Be still and know that there is a Presence. Star Wars called it "the Force." It's within you. It's around you. Be still and know.

Eckhart Tolle, the author, says, "*Wisdom comes with the ability to be still. Just look and just listen. No more is needed. Let stillness direct your words and your actions.*" See, stillness is where divine Presence speaks. Stillness is where divine Presence speaks. And if we listen, we can hear and we can be guided

There's a poem by David Wagoner titled "Lost," which captures the quiet and the truth of nature. It goes like this.

*Stand still. The trees ahead and bushes beside you
Are not lost. Wherever you are is called Here,
And you must treat it as a powerful stranger,
Must ask permission to know it and be known.*

*The forest breathes. Listen. It answers,
I have made this place around you.
If you leave it, you may come back again, saying Here ...*

*Stand still. The forest knows
Where you are. You must let it find you.*

There are times when, like the speaker in the poem, we feel lost. We could have fear or uncertainty that comes with an unfamiliar place that we're in, situation that we're in. But it also reminds us that the natural world -- including the desert -- is a source of wisdom and guidance. And that we human beings have the capacity to find our way, even in the most difficult circumstances. We can find our way, even when things seem desolate.

So, the desert teaches us to get quiet, to turn within and to remember we can do hard things. We can adapt with grace. We can grow and bloom in our own season. It's okay to cry when things get heated. Embrace your feelings and let them guide you. And we are part of something bigger: a beautiful, wise, loving universe.

The desert doesn't rush; it adapts, it endures, it blooms. And we can do that, too. So, when the night falls, when you walk outside, lift your eyes up to the stars and remember that, even in that vast silence and stillness and space, we're never alone. And, in fact, we are all very, very deeply connected to one another. And that is something to be very grateful for.

Blessings, everyone. Happy Wednesday!