



Dayenu: It would be enough

Clay Nelson © 22 August 2021

As we once again find the virus an unwelcomed guest in our midst, I pondered what to share with you today. The Ministry of Health is doing a great job, considering the enormity of the task, trying to keep us physically healthy. Our Prime Minister is doing her job of keeping us mentally sound with her calm assurance, clear messaging and kind manner. But I can't find a ministry for assisting us with our spiritual wellbeing. I guess that's my job. It is a daunting one, but I take comfort in my [opening words, by Elizabeth Mount](#). If I can remind you of your internal spiritual strength that will help you endure, that would be *Dayenu*. It will be enough for today.

If you came today hoping for a distraction from the new challenges and demands a lockdown present, you will be disappointed. Dr Brené Brown, who has spent two decades studying courage, vulnerability, shame, and empathy, explains why in an interview, *"I went back to church thinking that it would be like an epidural, like it would take the pain away. Faith and church were not an epidural for me at all; it was like a midwife who just stood next to me saying, 'Push. It's supposed to hurt a little bit.'"*

With Dr Brown's words drifting through my mind I reflected on *Dayenu*. What would be enough to survive the perfect storm I forecast last week? My first thought was to wonder how people survived our last hard lockdown. I found a lot online. A lot of them used the time for self-discovery. Their discoveries were as diverse as we are.

Charmaine was surprised to learn, "I really don't miss junk food like I thought I would". On the other hand Aaron gave thanks, "My passion for beer and junk food is a real lifesaver!!"

Some discovered that having time for simple pleasures would be enough. Chrisjan really likes fishing. Roseanne was very intentional about seeing her life differently, "I've been doing a small painting every two or three days picturing only what I can see in my neighbourhood

and around my home. My main aim was to bring the familiar into a new light and show the beauty around us if we look for it.”

Some confronted and survived their fears, like Brian who had found home schooling frightening but got through it. For him it was enough.

For some to be surprised by joy was *Dayenu*. Heinrich shared, “I met this lady at the start of lockdown, who is now permanently at my house. I’ve learnt that she is my wife and I was pleasantly surprised at how nice she is!

Perhaps a more universal experience to the lockdown is captured by Unitarian feminist Mary Wollenstonecraft Shelley, the author of *Frankenstein*, “Nothing is so painful to the human mind as a great and sudden change.” We see the pain in old behaviours kicking in like stripping supermarket shelves of toilet paper, making a mad dash to the liquor store, believing in our own invincibility by refusing to wear a mask, get a vaccine or stay put at home. It would be *Dayenu* if we could name and banish such behaviours and replace them with incarnate love. I recognise that requires pushing and it may hurt a little bit. Lemony Snicket captures it best, “Love can change a person the way a parent can change a baby — awkwardly, and often with a great deal of mess.”

Part of that mess is accepting the reality of another ancient word that is not easily translated. It resides comfortably alongside *Dayenu* — *Dukkha*. Buddhists say, “All is *dukkha*.” *Dukkha* implies impermanence. Nothing lasts. The path to enlightenment is understanding, accepting impermanence to the point where we no longer struggle against it. That would be *Dayenu*. In a changing world *Dukkha* lets us know that we are alive and being renewed miraculously each second, that the impermanence gives to life its freshness and surprise. It invites the possibility of love.

We will not achieve that possibility if we hold on to our delusions. My favourite delusion is the illogical but stubborn belief that only more effort is required for a better life. No real change of heart is needed. Just do what has never worked before, only do it more. Try harder. Work harder. This is music to the ears of all of us who try to defy gravity by pulling ourselves up by our boot straps. Some of us believe that we can earn love and approval. We think that the race belongs to the swift. No matter what Jesus said, we secretly are convinced that “the first will be

first” and “the last will be last.” A lockdown in our bubble during a life-threatening pandemic quickly puts the lie to this.

What I admire about religion is its stubborn refusal to accommodate these foolish delusions. Religion, while honouring human effort and inviting our firm resolve to be the best human beings we are capable of being, insists that we need to experience what it means to be loved and to receive grace. What we require will come to us. Effortlessly from within, from the community, from the holy mystery beyond us. *Dayenu*.

Our struggle against change intensifies our contractions to give birth to survival in hard times. The chaos surrounding us wants to consume us, but faith, our midwife, just calmly says push through it. In our pain we are likely to call her some pretty nasty names. We don't want to push through chaos, we want to control it.

Unitarian minister and author [Barbara Merritt shares an internal conversation she had with a scientific article about controlling chaos](#), you might find helpful.

My husband, the physics teacher, receives a weekly magazine called *Science News*. A recent cover story, in bold letters, riveted my attention and I snatched it: “Controlling Chaos.” Now, that’s a practical theology! My hopes soared. Here, in concise scientific prose, was the potential solution to my chequebook, my desk, my attic, my basement, my schedule, and possibly the junk drawer in the kitchen.

I took notes as I eagerly read the text. It said,

“Just as small disturbances can radically alter a chaotic system’s behaviour . . .”

Have the author’s children also been sick?

“. . . tiny adjustments can also stabilize its behaviour.”

Tiny adjustments? Why didn't I think of that? What tiny adjustments?

I read further.

“The success of this strategy for controlling chaos hinges on the fact that the apparent randomness of a chaotic system is really only skin deep.”

Is the scientific community sure about this? Have they ever seen my desk, or the toy room?

“Beneath this chaotic unpredictability hides an intricate but highly ordered structure.”

This is not obvious to the casual observer of my life.

“This is akin to balancing a ball on a saddle, the ball won’t roll off the saddle’s raised front or back, but continual adjustments are needed to kick it back into position, as it begins rolling off the sides.”

Continual adjustments! Now I’m beginning to think scientifically. What continual adjustments?

“We don’t avoid the chaos: We stay in the chaotic region.”

Yes, I do that!

“You don’t need to have a deep theoretical understanding of what’s going on. All you need to know, in effect, is the shape of the saddle.”

Shape! All I need is to understand the shape of my chaos! What shape?

And then, eureka!

The author writes that the way to keep chaos under control is *“by a constant stream of nudges.”*

Aha! I now have scientific proof that my intuitive reaction to chaos works. Nudge it! Don’t disturb or organize it. Nudge it!

The article has a very upbeat ending. It claims that chaos is not something to be avoided. Due to the flexible and dynamic nature of chaos, "*chaos may offer a great advantage.*"

I breathlessly await further scientific breakthroughs in this area. Meanwhile, I'll go nudge a few papers on my desk.

To nudge the chaos in our lives is *Dayenu*.

I've attempted to do my job this morning, but if it is not quite *Dayenu*, if you still hunger, I offer you this recipe by [Margaret Weis. She calls it a recipe for resilience](#)

It has been tweaked over time, so adjust as necessary.

Sometimes it yields more servings than anticipated.
Sometimes it needs a bit more of this ingredient or that.
It comes from generations who have gone before me, and I've added my own flavour along the way.

Ingredients:

One part courage

Two parts tears of failure and doubt

One part deep listening

One part each of both silence and laughter

A dash of trust

A pinch of wonder

A heaping scoop of naps and snacks

In a separate bowl, mix together family, friends, and those who challenge you to be your best self, those with whom you disagree.

Add slowly to the larger pot, add a bay leaf for ... well, whatever it is bay leaves do, and let simmer for as long as you need (which is often longer than you realise or anticipate).

Keep the heat at an even temperature – hot enough to cook throughout, but not so hot it burns the bottom.

Can be served at room temperature, warm, or even cold if necessary. Serve alongside your favourite soft blanket, dog, cat, or other soft item.

Make often,
Share with others,
Hold onto the leftovers – you'll need them after a long day that challenges your soul.

Dayenu.

Meditation / Conversation starter:

How has the lockdown challenged you?

How have you nudged it to remain spiritually whole?