INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Finding resilience in rhythm and practice

Kyle Kooyers *associate director, Kaufman Interfaith Institute*

Reflecting upon the trauma, anxiety, and loss we are experiencing here in West Michigan and around the world, I'm reminded of the words of the legendary saxophonist, Cannonball Adderley, as he introduced a popular blues tune written by his piano player.

Standing in a Capitol recording studio in 1966, with the band softly grooving underneath his preacher-esque voice, Adderley proclaims, "Ya know, sometimes we're not prepared for adversity. When it happens sometimes we're caught short. We don't know exactly how to handle it when it comes up. Sometimes we don't know just what to do when adversity takes over."

He chuckles and pauses for a moment, then continues. "And, uh, I have advice for all of us. I got it from my pianist Joe Zawinul who wrote this tune, and it sounds like what you're supposed to say when you have this type of problem ... 'Mercy, Mercy, Mercy.'"

What follows is a groovy, laid-back piece that uses a relatively simple repeated riff, or musical phrase, to hold space for both tension and release. This bears similarity, in both title and function, to the Kyrie eleison, or repetition of "Lord have mercy, Christ have mercy," found within the Christian tradition.

People of many diverse worldview identities have these kinds of "sacred riffs": our words, rhythms and practices that bring us to a place of centering and strength — resilience — even as our adversity is ever-present. As Adderley observed, sometime adversity — trauma, grief, anxiety, injustice — is so great that there is no quick fix or simple solution. It brings with it such a dysphoria or disorientation that we are at a loss for how to respond. So we look to that which centers us.

In her book "Trauma and Grace," Serene Jones writes about the power of ritual and liturgy to surprise and shape people who have experienced immense pain and loss. She proposes the idea of "body stories." These are tactile or physical memories that reappear unexpectedly in the course of a movement or practice. She draws comparisons to yoga positions and acupuncture eliciting memory and pain in our muscles.

Jones notes, "(They bring) to awareness areas of tightness or pain that may have gone unnoticed or ignored for years. ... To use the language of trauma theory, the body offers up visceral testimony."

The physical actions that we practice as people of diverse religious, spiritual or secular identities — the routine passages, prayers and ritual movements — are often what guide us as we elicit and confront our grief and trauma. For those of us navigating pain or loss, these repeated movements guide, re-form and give words to the state of our entire being at a time when we are often incapable of doing it on our own. At the same time that these motions invite us to enter the tension, the pain, the loss or the anxiety, they also remind us that we are supported and held, offering us release.

"It is a strange, unprecedented form of embrace," Jones observes. "The support might be an acupuncturist's hand, a yoga teacher's voice, a wall you rest your legs against, or a supportive community that you learn to lean on; it might even be a routinized prayer chant or an internal memory of your former balance."

For some this may look like prayer or meditation — concentrating on the power of repeated words, chants or breaths. For others this may look like the tactile or embodied rhythms of passing beads through our fingers, moving our bodies as in yoga or returning to a familiar text for contemplation and discernment. Often these practices can be very commonplace, like cooking food, sewing or knitting, spending time in nature or going for a walk or run. All of these can welcome us into a place of bearing witness to our own experiences and reality.

Kyle Kooyers is associate director of the Kaufman Interfaith Institute at Grand Valley State University.

If you go

What: We Remember: A Community Interfaith Memorial, the sixth annual service

How: Virtual 45-minute service available anytime at: interfaithunderstanding.org or facebook.com/KaufmanInterfaithInstitute

Trauma theory suggests that this witness-bearing process leads to resilience. As Jones notes, "(B)y testifying and bearing witness, you intuitively learn to bear up under the weight of the trauma you are speaking."

In the midst of this global pandemic, we may be feeling overwhelmed by the immense stress we're under, the responsibilities of caring for our family, of home schooling our kids or the looming cloud of financial anxiety, having to navigate life now without work. We may be struggling to keep a business afloat or navigate new realities and rhythms around school and learning. We may feel powerless, disheartened as we miss our routines, our favorite places, those things we had so looked forward to, and our friends and loved ones who are now inaccessible to us or have passed away. We may be experiencing disparities in health care as members of communities disproportionately affected by COVID-19, one of many layers to the systems of injustice that already threaten the lives of BIPOC (black, indigenous and people of color).

Trauma, grief, anxiety and injustice abound, and there is no quick fix or simple solution. We look to those places of centering, space for both tension and release, to ground ourselves that we might bear up and be resilient, ready for the next step of the healing journey, however that may look.

For the past six years, local hospice care providers have combined efforts to create a service for this centering and healing to take place. We Remember: A Community Interfaith Memorial has been and continues to be a space where the words, rhythms and practices of the interfaith community are offered for people to support and uphold each other in our adversity and loss.

Using the language of many traditions — prayers, songs, reflections, music and readings from sacred texts — this service gives language to grief, mourning and celebration of life. Certainly, as the Interfaith Memorials of years past have shown, resilience is found within every religious, secular and spiritual identity. Whether grieving recent losses, honoring those who have long since passed, or simply curious as to how various traditions commemorate the passing of life, all are welcome to share in this family-friendly space.

The theme of this year's service is resilience and is available online and is available at our website, InterfaithUnderstanding.org.

May we continually enter the brave work, embodied by the Interfaith Memorial, of seeking healing through community with one another, even while virtual and socially distanced, for this unique season of adversity and loss. Through togetherness and solidarity, centered in hope by those "sacred riffs," our collective song of resilience is born.

interfaith@gvsu.edu

We Remember: A Community Interfaith Memorial is a time for the interfaith community to support and uphold each other in adversity and loss. *Submitted, Kaufman Interfaith Insititute*

People of various faiths gather for a community memorial service. This year's event is available to viewers online. *Submitted, Kaufman Interfaith Institute*

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