In the last few weeks of 2020, after almost an entire year of loss and turmoil and illness and death, the world was rewarded with a medical miracle: a vaccine against the COVID virus that had proven to be 95 percent effective—the first of several being developed. The global conversation suddenly shifted from uncertainty around how much longer we would have to endure shutdowns and sequestrations to burgeoning elation that we had finally reached the beginning of the end of the pandemic and soon, a return to normal.

I, however, was not elated. What began as a barely perceptible knot in my gut gradually expanded over the next few weeks into whole-body anxiety. I didn’t understand what was happening in me, or why. Of course, I was glad that a vaccine had become available within a year of the outbreak and that we could finally start reversing the mounting death toll. So why didn’t I feel happy?

As it happened, I was preparing a sermon series based on the book *Radical Acceptance: Embracing Your Life with the Heart of a Buddha* (Bantam Dell, 2003) by the Buddhist teacher Tara Brach, Ph.D. Its theme centered on radical acceptance as a process to awaken from the trance of unworthiness in which we often find ourselves stuck. It includes taking a sacred pause to disrupt our usual pattern of distracting ourselves from pain and discomfort, then really paying attention to our body to allow ourselves to truly feel what’s happening in us, and finally following that pain wherever it may lead us.

More than once I’ve told my congregants that I give only the sermons I need to hear and that they are eavesdroppers who might benefit from my out-loud missives to myself. So I decided to practice what I was preaching and sat in my growing unease for what I hoped would be a few days, but which would ultimately turn into a few agonizing weeks.

Things got so uncomfortable I started to lose sleep over whatever was stirring in me, which is how I knew it must have been serious because I don’t lose sleep over anything! Not long after college, I famously slept
by rev. ogun holder

through a tornado touchdown less than a mile away as well as numerous tornado sirens while living in the Kansas City area. As I mindfully paid attention and listened, the truth—like a slow rising sun—gradually made itself clear: I did not want to go back to “normal.”

To be more specific, I did not want to go back to doing church normal—gathering in a building every Sunday morning to squeeze spiritual education, inspiration, and fellowship into three or four exhausting hours. This surprised me. Like millions of other clergy around the world, I had not been able to conduct a church service in person for months. Yes, we were doing a pretty good job of putting together a virtual service, but I missed many of the elements that only in-person worship could provide: lifting our voices together in song and our consciousness in prayer, as well as breaking bread and laughing together for hours in fellowship after the service.

What I couldn’t shake, however, was the bigger truth that the “normal” church model was dying a slow death. Fewer and fewer people were attending church, with more and more young adults professing to have no religious affiliation, even though still expressing some interest in spiritual development.

Then, the pandemic disrupted everything. I use the word “disrupt” intentionally. Many people continue to see what happened as an interruption, a navigable speed bump that temporarily slowed us down before we would soon return to our regularly scheduled pedal-to-the-metal grind. Many of us eagerly await the “return to normal.” While the phrase is a catchall for the reopening of businesses and recreation and the availability of our usual distractions, it also implies that we will go back to being just as we were before the virus.

But there’s no going back. The pandemic was not an interruption. It was a disruption: a radical change from the norm. We may not want to accept it, but we have been forever altered by this experience, knocked off course into some alternate timeline from which there is no return. And if we are being honest with ourselves, many of us do not want to go back to “normal.”

TAKING A REALITY CHECK

Life in the time of COVID has been unimaginably hard, and the pandemic graced us with something we hadn’t previously taken the time to do: a hard reality check. The past year of forced isolation and separation,
of personal and profound losses, of dread and uncertainty, gave us all the opportunity to dive deep into ourselves and reexamine everything: how we spend our time, who we spend our time with, our jobs and the very nature of work, the meaning of home and family, and both the light and shadow of ourselves, our neighbors, and our nation.

As a result of efforts to slow the spread of the virus, we discovered so much about ourselves, for better and for worse. Inequities and injustices were exposed. Relationships of all kinds were put to the test, some breaking under the strain, others morphing to become stronger than ever. Kindnesses, from neighborly to corporate, emerged as the question, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” became less rhetorical and more a matter of actual life or death.

As always with self-examination and inquiry, and the discomfort it brings, there is an invitation for inner healing and transformation. Any inner distresses caused by outer provocations are likely wounds from formative periods and traumas that still cry out for the reparative salve of love, and we cannot love what we do not face. It means that we have to stop ignoring the unease before it becomes a disease, that we have to break the pattern of distraction from our discomfort, that we have to make the time to pause and listen with an open heart to what our deepest, truest self is asking of us, and that we have to be brave enough to say, “Yes!”

To be clear, for some of us the pandemic affirmed that we are on the right track, that who we are and what we bring to the world is on point. Yet many of us realized that the life we lived before did not support our whole being or that the pandemic adaptations spoke more to how we wanted to do life all along.

We might feel guilty about this: Aren’t we effectively saying our pre-pandemic life was somehow wrong if we don’t want to resume it? We might even feel shame, thinking something must be wrong with us that we don’t want to return to the life we had before, exactly as it was. But it’s not a matter of right or wrong. There is no right or wrong, with the situation or with us. There is only what works for us in any given moment—and those moments are always changing, and we are always evolving. That’s called growth, and it’s a good thing. As uncomfortable and scary as we might imagine it to be, outside change is also good.

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Fast-forward to present day, and I find myself as a middle-aged man afraid to take major risks unless I know there’s a net to catch me. It’s the antithesis of faith—not blind faith, but the spiritual assurance that all is, and will always be, well, and that God will meet me at the point of my need. It was a message I had been preaching for years, but not living fully.

So I did what some might think was crazy: I decided to quit my full-time job as a church minister at a time when unemployment rates were at their highest since the Great Depression. I partnered with another minister and friend who was feeling much the same way as I was, and we launched a new online experience called project_SANCTUS, a safe and brave online space for us to support and inspire each other in living our holiest selves.

Now, I’m not advising anyone should quit their current jobs without knowing for sure that the next one will work out. When I shared my plans with my 20-year-old daughter, her first response was, “But my college tuition is good, right?” She was very supportive after I assured her that it was.

What I am inviting us all to know is that being true to ourselves by bringing our outer experience into alignment with the truth of our inner being is how we live our holiest self, how we experience true harmony and inner peace, how we live in and from love, how we experience fulfillment and abundance, how we show up as God. So for all our sakes, listen deeply, listen bravely and honestly, and answer the call. The world needs you, the whole you, now more than ever.