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Back to school through a lens

by Ralen Robinson

The new school year is fast approaching. This time pre-COVID, we would be inundated with back to school commercials, sales for school supplies, pictures of children wearing their new clothes on the first day back.

Yet, this school year looks different. New regulations and guidelines are being imposed. Options for online learning and partial in-person teaching are planned to replace in-person classroom settings. The usual excitement to hug friends, talk about summer memories, and file into classrooms is on hold. Teachers, parents, and students are trying to figure out how to go back to school as safely as possible.


The normal we knew is now an alternative world. Physical contact is restricted, faces are covered, and friends are visited through a screen.

This fall is not what we expected. How do we step into the new school year with restrictions, regulated days, learning via zoom—no normalcy in sight?

How do we approach the school year with excitement and wonder?

We hold to the words etched into the book of Joshua: “I hereby command you: Be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.”

Joshua’s words affirm that God is with us wherever we go. Doubt, trepidation, and weariness have no place here. The text encourages us to be courageous and willing to learn new things in changed times.



These words will prevail when classrooms are not as you remember them. We remember and hold tight to those words that learning can occur through this time of uncertainty. Gaining knowledge can occur.

This fall is the moment to explore, wonder, and find oneself amidst the chaos. Yet, this is easier said than done when all you want to do is return back to bustling hallways of schools, embrace someone without fear, and remove the screen's barrier.

This situation is hard. We need to name that, own that, and live into that. Once we do, there is a possibility to grow, to learn, and to reshape the year.

So, the question for this new school term is, what do you want for your school year? How are you going to navigate these unfamiliar waters in a time of unrest?

Look for the little things that make you happy. Bask in friendship. Explore new ways to tackle information and be in the moment. Because going to games, dances, plays, and school festivities is halted, we must redirect our desire to grow and explore. In this time of transition, we can meet our new norm with strength we never knew we had, discover learning through technology, and tap into new gifts. We know the fall is not what we expected or could imagine. So, keep moving forward and keep growing. Stand in the moment, strengthen your skills, use technology to the fullest, and appreciate that education can be elevated. Now is the time that you can create and make it your own.

Closing prayer:

Gracious God, we come to you in this time at the beginning of the new school year with many feelings that we can't convey feelings of fear, trepidation, and hope. We ask that you guide us in this time of uncertainty that we learn new ways to gain knowledge, perspectives, and skills. That through this newness, we can see the gifts you have given us and bestowed upon us. Allow us to continue to thrive, preserve, and wonder during this time. Amen.

Discussion questions:

1. *How are you preparing to go back to school?*
2. *What are your goals for the school year? And how are you going to achieve them?*
3. *How will you take charge of your learning this year?*



Ralen Robinson is a recent graduate of the United Lutheran Seminary at Philadelphia. She is currently seeking a call to be an ordained minister in the ELCA. Ralen believes faith and a good pair of shoes can take you a long way.

Faith Reflections: How are you?

by Ralen Robinson


It's okay not to be okay.

The other day I was in Trader Joes getting groceries when I ran into someone I knew. In our conversation, they asked, "How are you doing?" And I responded, "okay." Yet, that was far from the truth.

I was stressed from work and had a mountain of emails that needed my attention. The store didn't have the items I needed, and I was annoyed that I would have to go to another store later. It was going to rain, and I left my umbrella by the door, forgetting it in my haste. I got in an argument with a friend earlier that day, and I replayed that conversation in my head. Everything that could go wrong that day did, and I was at my wits' end and wanted to throw the entire day away. I had a range of emotions. It was not all pretty.

So, when I was asked this question, I responded quickly and easily. Out of habit, I replied, "I'm doing okay." When I walked away, I realized that my response did not accurately convey my emotions. I left with my bottled-up feelings of frustration and the appearance of being "okay." But that was a lie.

How many times do we respond with an "okay" when everything is not fine? When everything is falling to pieces, and our emotions are so raw that acknowledging them will lead us to the brink of tears, why do we say we're fine? Instead of naming and owning our stresses and anxieties, we hide them. We take them out when we're alone, or with people we are close to. Being okay is acceptable, but sharing one's emotions, heartaches, and pains can be uncomfortable. If I responded with the truth, I would be afraid that they don't want to listen, or I that was burdening them with my problems.



We are so used to being put together, that we don't share our struggles. We put our struggles and pain behind tight smiles. The fear and apprehension of vulnerability is crippling. So, how do we share that side of us and remove the mask that holds those feelings within? How do we pause before we respond and tap into our emotions? We have to have a brave heart to know that it is okay not to be okay. That in this time of uncertainty and pandemic, we are together. Our struggles are not exclusive to us but shared with humanity. We do not have to be shamed or feel burdened. We are not alone.

Psalm 31: 1-2 says, "In you, O Lord, I have taken refuge; let me never be put to shame; in your righteousness deliver me. Incline your ear to me; rescue me speedily. Be a rock of refuge for me, a strong fortress to save me."

These powerful words are a reminder that we are not alone. Through the Lord, we can find refuge in people and in ourselves.

David's plea is a reminder that whatever we are going through, it too shall pass. We don't have to deal with our stuff silently but can open up to one another. When we do, we might find shared experiences that lead to healing.

It is okay to permit yourself not to be okay and deal with those feelings. We can't push them away and forget about them. We have to sit in our grief, loneliness, sadness, anxiety, and pain and then name it. We have to be on a first-name basis with our emotions so we can deal with them. For when we experience and process those feelings, we will feel lighter, happier, and calmer. Hardships will occur, and sadness will ache. Pain is inevitable, but so is happiness, joy, and laughter.

The next time your emotions are raw, don't conceal it with an "okay" or "fine." Pause before you answer.

Closing prayer:

Gracious Lord, help us be open, honest, and vulnerable with ourselves and with one another. Grant us the strength and courage to share our burdens as well as our highs with each other. To know that we are not alone and that our struggles, pain, and heartache are intertwined in the brokenness in the world. Lord, give us courage that we may share and hold one another in their feelings. Amen.

Discussion questions:

1. How are you doing? What emotions are simmering under the surface?
2. How can you ask people how they are doing and be present for their feelings?
3. How are you being transparent today? How are you showing courage the next time you talk?



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