

And Not Grow Weary

BY **ROBIN BARTLETT**, SENIOR PASTOR, FIRST CHURCH IN STERLING, MASSACHUSETTS

My son learned a song at Village Green preschool that he made me sing with him all the next day. Maybe you know it.

<i>We're goin' on a bear hunt.</i>	<i>Uh-oh!</i>
<i>(We're goin' on a bear hunt)</i>	<i>A forest!</i>
<i>We're going to catch a big one,</i>	<i>A big, dark forest.</i>
<i>(We're going to catch a big one,)</i>	<i>We can't go over it.</i>
<i>I'm not scared</i>	<i>We can't go under it.</i>
<i>(I'm not scared)</i>	<i>Oh no!</i>
<i>What a beautiful day!</i>	<i>We've got to go through it!</i>
<i>(What a beautiful day!)</i>	<i>Stumble trip! Stumble trip! Stumble trip!</i>

So it is with the darkness of our deepest suffering. We can't go over it, we can't go under it. We can't get around it. We've got to go through it.

In the Hebrew Bible, Isaiah 40:31 says: "But they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint."

The prophet is speaking to those who have been suffering for a long time. He is addressing the Judean people who have been in exile in Babylon. They are tired, beaten down, and in the depths of despair.

The prophet is trying to coax them to remember God's promises to them, using almost a pleading tone. *Have you not known? Have you not heard? Has it not been told from the beginning? Our God created the foundations of the earth, the people are like tiny ants below. The Holy One created all of this, called it all by name, loved it all into existence. Wait on the Lord. He will give strength to the powerless; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint.*

We know what it is to need that kind of reassurance. We are tired. We have endured daily images of people in the news who need our help and protection: from wildfires and floods, mass shootings and white supremacist rallies, hate crimes aimed at Muslims and Jews and LGBTQ folk, the opioid crisis and the health care crisis, and the list goes on. And so our empathy triggers are on high alert, and have started to wear out. We get compassion fatigue.

Given our exhaustion, it's pretty impressive that we can still wake up in the morning and go about our business with some modicum of energy, and even joy.

Speaking for my own local community, and perhaps for yours, I would like to add that we are sick of cancer; *tired of cancer*; **DONE with cancer**. Really. Cancer is an indiscriminate dasher of spirits. It is a silent killer of faith. It steals lives and livelihoods, children from their parents and parents from their children.

And cancer has much to teach us about the depths of both our weariness and of our strength.

I talked to a beloved church member, Jen Kalnicki, on the phone when she had just had her first round of chemotherapy, and she was so weak that she said she had to drink from a straw all day because she couldn't lift her head off of the pillow. She was so weary she couldn't lift her head. She has these two beautiful little girls, and sometimes she *can't lift her head*.

The prophet in the book of Isaiah tells the long-suffering Judean exiles to wait patiently on God, who will *eventually* give us strength. Patience is a virtue, but it's not my best. My favorite prayer is: "Lord, give me patience. And hurry."



Quest

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First forget
inspiration.
Habit is more
dependable....
Habit is persistence
in practice.
—Octavia E. Butler

A monthly for religious liberals

THINKING ABOUT PERSISTENCE

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But scripture says, “Those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.”

Of course, not all of us walk, and many of us don’t run. Personally, I’m no more likely to run than I am to mount up on eagles’ wings. To be honest, if a bear were chasing me down the trail, I’d just give up right away, lie down and ask the Lord to take me. I’ve led a good life. My children will be fine; they have good fathers.

But it seems that there is something powerful there in the text, and I wanted to know more. So given that running is not my strong suit, I reached out to two of the marathon runners in our congregation. “I’m writing a sermon on how to ‘run and not be weary.’ I have no idea how that’s done. You two are always running marathons. Do you have any advice?”

And I want to tell you what they said, because it’s pure insight about living a good and faithful life. In fact, they were so convincing it almost made me want to do one of those Couch-to-5K running programs. Almost.

Jennifer Caron said this:

*First of all, there is no such thing as long distance running **without** growing weary. We definitely grow weary! Endurance training, though, is all about how to push our capacity so that we grow weary **later on** into the run. When you first start running, weariness might be at three miles, but through persistence and extending the mileage slowly each week, pretty soon you don’t grow weary until 12 miles, and so on.*

Also, taking care of our bodies—eating healthfully, getting rest, getting body-work, etc., is necessary.

*Then there’s what we do **WHEN** we grow weary. You have to take care of yourself **physically**:*

EAT! (And drink.) We love snacks—healthy snacks that nourish us and fuel us at proper intervals for what’s ahead.

Go at a comfortable pace. Tune into your body, and choose a speed that is not too slow or too fast, but just right for that distance.

*Most of all, you have to take care of yourself **mentally** (and this is 95% of it):*

You have to make it fun—run with friends, listen to music, celebrate the crap out of it when you’re done!

All the people out there supporting you make you feel stronger. Think of them.

*There is no such thing as long distance running **without** growing weary.*

You can’t freak out when the weariness and pain come. An old coach of mine would say, “Get comfortable with the discomfort.” So when the cramping and fatigue creep in, we’re not going to freak out. Instead, it’s familiar and like an old friend. I will often say out loud, “Oh, hello there, groin/hip/back pain, ol’ friend. I thought I might find you right about now.” This helps you keep calm and not despair. Reframing “pain” as “sensations” also helps me.

It’s also worth keeping perspective about people who are suffering way worse, and what they would give to have the good health we marathoners have. This inspires you to push on when all else fails.

Of course, using a trusted coach to help prepare you for the way is crucial.

Kate Pietrovito added this:

The question about how to run and not grow weary makes me think of a Gandhi prayer that we recite weekly in the Spirit Play classroom—specifically,

this line: “My wisdom comes from within and without.” Endurance and motivation come from both internal and external sources. To finish a long race, a difficult race, you must leverage both.

Internally, it’s the mental and physical training and desire. This applies to everything: the desire to work hard, the desire to achieve a personal goal, the things you tell yourself to keep you going when you feel like giving up. Think about the work you’ve put in that would be all for naught if you quit.

Externally, our world has so many sources of inspiration. You think of your family. You think of your friends. You think of a favorite phrase at First Church: “We can do hard things.” And you repeat it as a mantra when your energy is slipping away.

Jen Kalnicki gave me permission to share what she wrote about her first week of chemo:

The past few days have sucked. You really take for granted the ability to lift your head, hold your phone, just breathe. There have been moments of doubt (I can’t possibly do this); moments of dread (What if it’s like this the whole time?); moments of anger (Why are we treating this so aggressively? Others are able to work/walk/exist, why can’t I?); and finally, moments of despair (Just hot, hot tears).

But each time those moments appeared, there was something equally glorious happening—Mark’s steady and calming love crashing over me in waves; Ava and Lili’s ability to comfort and motivate; friends and family swooping in to carry the burden; and the freedom to cry it out. The messages lift and carry us through those lows, even when I cannot respond.

Today, I bear witness to the scandalous generosity and outrageous love this journey has shown me. Today, I woke up able to move a bit more. Today, I woke up. And tomorrow, I’ll get up and do it again.

Friends, in this long, slow slog of us loving each other and loving a beautiful and broken world, as we wait on God to give us strength for the journey, remember these tips from Jennifer, Kate and Jen:

Start by acknowledging that we *will* definitely grow weary. We are only human, doing the best we can. Normalize that. Pay attention to it. Then, take care of your bodies. Eat good, healthy food, and drink water. Go at a comfortable pace.

Please, make it fun. Celebrate the crap out of everything. Laugh. Let music be the soundtrack to your life. Use the desire within you and the motivation all around you. Remember you are not alone.

Don't freak out when it gets painful. Don't retreat. Get comfortable with discomfort. Treat pain like an old friend who reminds you that you're still alive, that your heart is still tender. Keep calm and don't despair. Remember who has it worse, what you are grateful for, who you are living for, and why.

Use trusted coaches who will help you prepare the way. Leverage internal and external sources of strength. Your wisdom comes from within and without.

We can't go over it, we can't go under it, we have to go through it. So don't quit. Swoop in to share burdens and send messages of love. Give the freedom to yourself and others to cry it out.

Together, we can stumble trip through the darkness. Together, we can move on and not grow weary. Together, we can do hard things. Together, our generosity and love keeps people alive. This grace is a scandal and an outrage, and sometimes it is nothing less than the reason people wake up in the morning.

Tomorrow, we can get back up and do it all again. ■

Perseverance

BY DIANE TEICHERT,
FORMER MINISTER, PAINT
BRANCH UU CHURCH,
ADELPHI, MARYLAND



Until my stroke four years ago, at a very healthy 61 years of age, I did not know what perseverance was. Recently, in talking with my greatly supportive spouse, I referred to needing perseverance. "I wish you wouldn't use that word." *Why?* "It sounds so, well, severe. Why not say persistence instead?"

This reminded me of a recreation therapist in the hospital who had offered me the chance to try a favorite activity of my past, gardening, so that I could experience how adaptations would make it still possible, even though I was now hemiplegic, with paralysis on the left side of my body. I told her I would try anything offered to me. She remarked, "Yes, you're rigid that way." *Rigid?*

Sometimes our circumstances call for something more severe than mere persistence. After eight weeks of acute rehab hospitalization, and intense love and support of family, friends, congregations, neighbors and colleagues, I had recovered bodily functions and the ability to talk, read, dress, bathe, and walk with a quad cane and an ankle-foot orthotic, but had not regained any use of my left arm or hand. I wear an arm sling during the day and a hand splint at night.

Some of my friends who kept me company at the hospital thought my physical therapist was mean to me, but she knew she had to push me hard in those first weeks. It was important that I try to do what I could no longer do, so that my brain's plasticity could develop new pathways for communicating with my muscles before too much time passed. She was severe, but not unkind. She taught me to persevere. I loved her for it.

Yes, I still get very discouraged by all I cannot do, and often have negative

thoughts. But since my stroke I've gotten to know other people who are physically disabled whose abilities are expected to decline (whereas mine are likely to remain as they are now), and some who have never been able-bodied and can't realistically expect to improve. In these people I have found inspiration and courage to persevere to DO what I can do and BE who I can be.

Even beyond that, my own disability has awakened me to how much remains to be done in addressing the ableism that pervades our society. Recently, one hero, Rev. Theresa Ines Soto, introduced me to the ableism inherent in the use of the word "lame." As in, "That's so lame!" and "What a lame excuse!" In those expressions, it means "weak." Yet now that I am lame and know others who are even more so, I know we are among the strongest people there are. To do almost anything at all, we must persevere, sometimes rigidly. We are hardly weak.

Consider how much perseverance is required for people to endure—and thrive in—other oppressive human realities, such as racism, poverty, exploitation, violence, etc. When we view the world through this lens we can see clearly how all people must join and persist together if we are to eliminate barriers to a full life for all. To persist is to never give up. Perseverance is, well, to persist severely. May we be so! ■

Across the decades, through changes in technology and staff, through world crises and institutional crises, the CLF has been there, offering people around the world comfort and challenge in the form of our liberal faith. You can help the CLF continue to persist by offering your generous support, by sending a check in the enclosed envelope or by donating at clfuu.org/give. ■

Swimming Lessons

BY JAKE MORRILL, LEAD
MINISTER, OAK RIDGE
UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST
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My first sermon at the first church I ever served (which is also the only church I have served) was called “Swimming Lessons.” Countless seminary papers and exams had brought me to this moment. Now, time had come to climb into the pulpit to impart the kind of great wisdom available to a young man with a divinity degree on his wall.

Here’s the gist: as a swimmer learns to trust that water will hold a body, so, too, must a person learn to trust in the Holy. With my pressed khaki pants, and a haircut that shone, I delivered the message with messianic conviction. I told the congregation that they and I would be learning to risk faith together. It would require us to allow ourselves to be known and to be held in the Spirit, as a swimmer is held by the water. As a sign of my willingness to be seen as imperfect—lest there be any doubt—I confessed to them that I didn’t know how to swim.

But, I assured them, I intended to learn. Was willing to do whatever it took. So, as their new pastor literally learned how to swim, we would all learn to navigate the metaphorical waters of the newness we shared with each other.

What I imagined the congregation would take from the sermon was a fresh understanding of the nature of faith. But, a couple days later, it became clear to me that this was not what most had gained from my talk. What seemed to stick, instead, was that the new pastor was bent at long last on mastering a basic childhood skill.

Obligingly, a few of the church elders had, on my behalf, already inquired at the Civic Center about adult swim lessons. They learned I’d be welcome in a morning class offered for seniors that met three times a week. It was all

arranged. The coach would be waiting. The class was made up almost entirely of women several decades older than I was, and was called “Swimmin’ Women.”

After a lifetime on dry land, had I really intended to learn how to swim? Sure. Almost certainly. Well, probably. I would have, no doubt, looked into the matter. At some point in my life. But the congregation seemed to believe that, simply because I had declared from the pulpit my intent to take swimming lessons, that I actually had an intention to do so. They assumed, in other words, that I meant what I said, and would follow through.

After a lifetime on dry
land, had I really intended
to learn how to swim?
Sure. Almost certainly.
Well, probably.

Either I live in a small city, or else a large town. Whichever, news here travels fast. So, within a few days, it seemed that everyone around was aware of my future with the Swimmin’ Women. At the grocery store, at the video rental store, everywhere. Wherever I went, there were kindly smiles that only barely masked gentle smirks. People knew.

To that point, my history of physical exertion had been sporadic, half-hearted. I tended to sign up eagerly for activities, then not follow through. It was my way. No one seemed to mind, least of all me. But it seemed I was now living a life in which my preferred sluggishness might become a matter of public concern. Giving up before I’d really gotten started ceased to be an option.

Bobbie, the coach of the Swimmin’ Women and a retired gym coach, was all business. She lined up her charges according to skill. This meant that,

while swimmers who had swum since the Hoover administration took up the far lanes, where their perfect strokes sliced the water, I had the slow lane entirely to myself. Well, except for the kickboard. Bobbie, it turned out, was a stickler for form. I was not going to dog-paddle, nor run out the clock with my limb-draping version of the dead man’s float. No. More was expected of a Swimmin’ Woman.

Bobbie was determined. Consequently, I had no choice but to be determined. As I churned through the water behind a kickboard, making my way lap after lap, there she was, right above me at poolside, calling down corrections to whatever my legs were doing.

Four months later, at the Christmas party, the Women gave me a new swimsuit in recognition that, while any of them could have beaten me in a race, it could now charitably be said that I knew how to swim. The gap between my declared intent and my actual life, at least with regard to swimming, had been closed. In its place, a grudging pinch of integrity, a hint that I was capable of doing what it took to get the thing done.

Everyone knows that congregations are boring, old-fashioned, and more political than Congress before an election. But, on the bright side, they can also be judgmental. Think of an old friend who lets you know exactly the one thing that you need to hear. Now, picture a whole community like that in your life.

Maybe how things are for you matches precisely how you intended them to be. All I know is that, when it comes down to me, for a long time I was only floating. And it was a congregation that finally required me to apply myself to practice, and persist in the struggle of



effort. Which, as it turns out, is what it takes to swim. ■

Cinders as Far as the Eye Can See

BY REV. DENNIS MCCARTY, AUTHOR AND PLAYWRIGHT, BLOOMINGTON, INDIANA



While I explored central Idaho's Snake River Plain, I camped at Craters of the Moon National Monument. I had a weather satellite photo, on which the Snake River Plain forms a curving band of tan and green, fading to gray where the volcanic track of the Yellowstone Hotspot comes in. Against those muted colors, the black lava fields in Craters of the Moon stick down from the north like a sore thumb.

The eruptions that formed these fields began through a 75-mile crack in the earth's crust, back in the days of the Columbian mammoth. Lava spewed for thousands of years, finally ceasing while the first Caesars ruled Rome. The cinders have long cooled. Now they stretch as far as the eye can see, a thousand square miles of blasted desert.

I stood one morning on the highway pullout above Craters of the Moon, gazing at the black horizon of this volcanic sideshow. My eye strayed back from the horizon and lit on a nearby tuft of vegetation growing from a crack between volcanic boulders. At first it seemed incongruous that a wildflower could struggle up from such barrenness. A couple thousand years of dust must have settled into the bottom of that crack to support it. And a seed blew in. A sprinkle of rain now and then, and seeds have no choice but to try to grow wherever they land.

Lava fields are incredibly rugged terrain. Traveling off designated walkways is prohibited, but even if a person tried, basalt edges sharp as broken

glass would quickly cut even the stoutest shoes to ribbons. Yet everywhere I wandered, grasses and wildflowers sprouted from fissures and low places. It might take thousands more years, but they are going to show the harsh stone who's boss. There, it seems to me, is a lesson in persistence.

It struck me like a flash: T. S. Eliot was wrong, April is *not* the cruelest month, breeding flowers from the dead land. Flowers breeding from the dead land is an act of heroism which merits deep human reverence. Ever and always, amid Extinction Events or these lava fields or whatever the backside of human technology may do to us, life will ever venture forth upon the blasted land.



If we want the meaning of life, as far as I'm concerned, there it is. Human greatness, I say, is a delusion. Achievement is just a spark against the relentless winds and limitless tides of time and change. But a seed drills into new soil, a hand is offered to a new stranger. As long as our species endures, that will be the meaning and achievement that matters.

Excerpted from Dennis McCarty's book Reflections: On Time, Culture, and Spirits in America. ■



Blessing for the Brokenhearted

BY JAN RICHARDSON, DIRECTOR, THE WELLSPRING STUDIO, LLC, ORLANDO, FLORIDA

There is no remedy for love but to love more. —Henry David Thoreau

Let us agree
for now
that we will not say
the breaking
makes us stronger
or that it is better
to have this pain
than to have done
without this love.

Let us promise
we will not
tell ourselves
time will heal
the wound,
when every day
our waking
opens it anew.

Perhaps for now
it can be enough
to simply marvel
at the mystery
of how a heart
so broken
can go on beating,

as if it were made
for precisely this—

as if it knows
the only cure for love
is more of it,

as if it sees
the heart's sole remedy
for breaking
is to love still,

as if it trusts
that its own
persistent pulse
is the rhythm
of a blessing
we cannot
begin to fathom
but will save us
nonetheless.



From Your Minister

BY MEG RILEY
SENIOR MINISTER,
CHURCH OF THE
LARGER FELLOWSHIP

As another gardening season begins to come to a close, I offer gratitude for all of the lessons that I learn from my garden. From time spent with these little green friends I learn a great deal of what I know about beauty, joy, abundance, resilience and persistence.

When I think about persistence in the garden, the first image that arises is earthworms. Everywhere I dig, in every area where there is soil, there are also dozens of squirming, dirt-covered worms. I greet their presence the way I might receive a rainbow, as a positive sign that all is well! Worms tell me that the soil is alive, and nourishing all that grows in it.

Earthworms crawl around and dig thousands of tiny tunnels the diameter of their body, allowing air and water to move through the soil. They eat organic matter, bring it all the way through themselves, and release it in castings that enrich the soil. The worms are my tiny co-creators, though I only see them when I dig or when it rains and they need to come up for breath. Still, for me they are a profound symbol of persistence. Day after



day, season after season, they are doing their part to create lush, beautiful soil.

Another part of the garden that has taught me about persistence—if not in such a good way—is horseradish. In my garden, horseradish is the trickster figure I contend with year after year. When I first started gardening, a botanist up the street handed off a small plant to me. Did he warn me that if I planted horseradish, I could never change my mind about it? No, he did not. He cheerfully passed it off as if it were a normal plant.

Ever since then I have attempted to remove it from where I chose to plant the thing—an unfortunate place in the middle of my bed of strawberries and rhubarb. Friends have come over to help. We have dug and dug and we used to feel victorious after we pulled up every shred of it we could see. After our sessions, the yard would look like we had buried a body. Now, I am no longer delusional about my ability to remove this plant. I know that those long white roots will spread underground anywhere they have to go in order to keep growing. I will find horseradish in my lily bed, in my peony bed, anywhere that I have not dug up and searched.



If I want to shape the world there is simply going to have to be some effort involved.

It's worth remembering that what persists in life is not always up to us.

Still another lesson from the garden is that there are some pests that will persist unless I stop them, and others that can be ignored because their season will end. This helps me to decide which battles are worth fighting. Those shiny little beetles known as Japanese beetles, for instance—they will eventually go away if I ignore them, admittedly turning a significant number of leaves on my flowers to lace before they do. They have a season. This doesn't stop me from walking around with a bucket of soapy water scooping them off of my favorite flowers, but it does calm me down about worrying they will destroy everything if I am not vigilant.

On the other hand, aphids aren't going to stop spreading until I spray them with something to halt them. It's good to know which problems must be addressed and which can simply be lived through, and to make choices accordingly.

And then there are weeds. I must say something about weeds. No amount of mulch, landscape fabric, or anything else I've tried can match the persistence of the thousands of weeds which spring up year after year. Here's where my own persistence becomes a factor in the garden. If I don't keep going out on a frequent basis and wrestling down the growth of weeds, all of my planning and cultivating will soon be lost in a tangled briar of unwanted plants.

This is one reason I gave up maintaining a community garden plot to which I had to commute. I need to be out in the garden daily, keeping up with things, persistently installing my own point of view about who lives and who dies among the plants. If I drop it for a week, there will be a high price to pay. This is a fact—the plants grow persistently and I have to show my own persistence if I want to have a say in which ones grow, and how. If I want to shape the world there is simply going to have to be some effort involved.

Others may think this daily attention sounds like drudgery, and content themselves with a potted tomato plant or two. For me, the most persistent and enduring fact about the garden is that I am deeply joyful, and spiritually grounded, when dirt and worms and even horseradish and weeds are my companions, when my own will to shape how life shows up is just one of the forces at work in co-creating a lush little piece of earth.

As the harvest comes to completion, and I contemplate once again facing the northern season of frozen soil and dormancy, my love for the ecosystem I know best persists. And, to my mind, there is no finer form of persistence than the persistence of love. ■

REsources for Living

BY LYNN UNGAR, MINISTER FOR LIFESPAN LEARNING, CHURCH OF THE LARGER FELLOWSHIP



I have a fairly big front lawn—or what passes for a large lawn in my suburban California location. If, that is, it passes for a lawn at all. It's not exactly a level field of lush, manicured green. It's rutted where the moles have been at it, and wasn't that level to begin with. But it has grass. Well, grasses. Several kinds, most of which aren't usually considered lawn grasses, some of which die in the summer and some of which die in the winter. Also different kinds of clover and a low groundcover. And a variety of different weeds. Against which I have a vendetta.

Well, not really. After all, the whole "lawn" is basically weeds. But there are a surprising number of weeds that will either turn prickly as they grow or will have seeds that are prickly. And since I use this space for training my dogs, I am determined that everything prickly or potentially hazardous to dogs must go. And so I spend hours sitting on or roaming the lawn, pulling out weed after weed.

Many years back my neighbor, after watching me at this pursuit day after day, observed, "You know that's not going to work, don't you?" He wasn't wrong. I have this enduring fantasy that I'm going to manage to pull every weed of some particular type before it goes to seed, and then it will be (mostly) gone forever, but of course it never happens that way. In fact, mystifyingly, each year weeds that I have never before seen in the space appear, as if they were evolving new and pricklier ways to thwart my efforts. Each year as I pluck away at my lawn, trying and most often failing to pull up the roots that will regrow the weeds overnight, his words come back to me.

"You know that's not going to work, don't you?" It makes me wonder about

the difference between persistence and foolish obstinacy. I mean, persistence is obviously a good thing. Parenting

books and articles tell us to praise our children's efforts, rather than their outcomes, so that they will learn that trying hard is what ultimately leads to success. People of all ages are assured that the crucial personality trait for doing well in life is "grit," the ability to overcome obstacles and follow a task to completion. We tell ourselves, in little posters on Facebook and in song and with a loving pat on the shoulder, "You can do this hard thing."

But what about the time and emotional energy and soul-force that we waste on things that are never going to work, are never going to be right? For many people their greatest regret is the years they have wasted staying in a job or a relationship that sucked all the joy from their lives. It is possible to spend vast amounts of time and money preparing for a career which, it turns out, you purely hate. You could enter a relationship with commitment and dedication and realize at some point that you would be better off away from this person than with them. Sometimes it turns out that if you have a square peg and a round hole you would be better off if you stopped pounding.

So how do you know? How do you tell when you need to power on until you make your goal and when you need to stop pushing the river and just go with the flow? How can you tell when this is one of those many instances when in order to achieve something meaningful you need to work really hard to make it happen, and when you have encountered the exception that is just going to drain the life from you if you fail to change paths?

I can't say that I know. Certainly I've given up on things that I wish I had followed through on, and stuck steadfastly through heartbreak that I could have walked away from. And goodness

knows there are many, many situations where you really don't have much of a choice if you or loved ones are going to survive. But here's my guess: it is good to learn to recognize different kinds of pain.

Those who have undertaken any kind of exercise program know that building strength and endurance requires a certain amount of discomfort. Your muscles grow stronger at the point of fatigue, which is not a place that many of us enjoy. Stressed muscles ache, but they also grow stronger, and before long you are able to do things without pain that you weren't able to do before.

Most of us also know the feeling when a wrong move—or simply effort beyond what we are capable of—does genuine damage. The sharp sensation of something ripping or popping is a cue to stop. Right now. Before you do any more damage. Some kinds of pain you absolutely should not persist through. And for many people with chronic illnesses, the pain you should *not* persist through looks from the outside a whole lot like many other people's healthy effort. It isn't the same for everyone.

But I suspect that deep down we largely have a sense of what is the pain of effort and fatigue, and what is the pain that comes from damaging ourselves. Souls, like muscles, can ache and burn and grow. Souls, like muscles, can tear when they are twisted too hard in the wrong direction. It isn't always clear in the moment, but if you listen to the pain, I suspect that eventually you will know.

Which is how I know I will carry on with my front lawn, weed by weed, patiently trying



for what I want to grow, trying to protect what I love, even though I know I'll never fully succeed. ■



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Ra's Army

BY JOHN, CLF MEMBER INCARCERATED
IN OKLAHOMA

From a distance they look like miniature, yellow-helmeted soldiers marching along next to the fence, sort of an invasion of Ra's army. There's no point in mounting a defense to stop them; you might as well surrender when the first yellow helmet appears.

From early spring, long into fall—day after day, week after week—they appear, yellow helmets moving onward. That's why I like dandelions. They're persistent. ■



