Here’s a short story that I share with you with permission from its source. I’m very grateful for their sense of humor and willingness to share it with all of us. It’s a story about themselves and a long-time former member of our Fellowship I’m changing their names since this will be posted online. “Rita and Bob went to Town Hall to take care of some business pertaining to the Fellowship building. Rita parked her red Toyota Celica in the crowded lot. When they went back to the car, her keys didn’t work. Bob, being an expert at just about everything, worked diligently to break into the car – the way a thief would! After Bob broke into the car, Rita put her hands on the steering wheel and exclaimed to Bob, who was sitting in the passenger seat “This is not my car, Bob!” They bolted out of the car, closed the doors and looked for her car. It was on the other side of a white van that was parked between her car and the stranger’s car that they had just broken into!”

I imagine we all have moments like these in our lives - maybe not so humorous - where we struggle and struggle to make something work in our lives, or to get through a difficult task, and all the energy is for nought. It might feel like we’re swimming upstream at a time in our lives when we’re called to do the hard thing, or we might just wind up working on breaking into the wrong car.

I’m trying to learn to tell the difference; whether when I’m facing a hardship, is it a necessary or unavoidable difficulty, or have I just gone to the wrong spot. Sometimes we can’t tell the difference until we’re sitting in someone else’s driver seat. But it’s a question we’ve begun asking ourselves in my own household when we face something challenging in our wider lives, and it’s a question that I haven’t always been prone to ask.

Maybe it was my working class upbringing, or maybe it was my German Lutheran Dad’s work ethic, but I’ve always known the message that life isn’t always easy and you have to put your back into it sometimes - sometimes for a long time. Many things we yearn for can fall into this category. Getting through high
school, or college take years of hard work, and now these days, a lot of debt to show for the higher education degree most jobs require.

Getting through a life-changing illness - either in body or in mind - can be a place of yearning where endurance and hope are the saving virtues. Our lives are in the hands of other people, even if we’re the center of the story. We have to rely on the wind, from this morning’s wisdom story, to take us across the dry places in our lives.

My own road from working in Information Technology to Community Development to the Ministry was like this. I left a lucrative career, at the age of 28 - making about the same amount of money my dad was making after a lifetime of his work - because it wasn’t personally fulfilling. I yearned for something else; I felt a sense of call. Five years of graduate education and what would amount to a mortgage - in most parts of our country - worth in education loans was a surreal choice to make - especially considering my roots. But, I know that choice to swim upstream was the right choice for me - I didn’t break into the wrong car.

How do we know when it’s the right choice or not? There’s a graphic novel series that I’ve read where the anti-hero of the story (in this case Lucifer himself) talks about the difference between desire and greed. To paraphrase: desire is to need what we can never have. Greed is to need what is readily available. To add a third type of wanting to that scene, I might say yearning is to need what is right, but not yet at hand. We yearn to find or fulfill our purpose; we yearn for justice; we yearn for a caring, loving, kind world. So when we’re struggling hard for something, maybe we can ask what type of “want” we’re trying to fulfill this time as a starting point.

In my own life, when I run across something that’s deeply tied to my sense of purpose, or part of the bigger vision of my life, I’m willing to put a lot of energy into swimming upstream. These days though, I walk away from other stuff that
saps my time and energy. I watch for patterns. Once a project has enough unex-
pected hurdles, unless its essential to home or health, I drop it. We can only man-
age so much before the frivolous winds up veering us down the wrong path; sap-
ping our ability to accomplish the things that fulfill our purpose.

Occasionally, that which saps our ability to be effective in life are not com-
lications or hurdles in life; sometimes they’re misinformation. I’ve gotten into
almost daily habit of watching Fox News. It happened by accident really. There’s a
local diner that I like to goto where I read while I eat for about an hour to hour and
a half every day. For a long time I thought they changed their news station depend-
ing on the time of day. Fox, CNN or the local 12. But after a few months I realized
that the pattern was almost entirely just Fox. Apparently, the owner requires the
waitstaff to put Fox on, and they can only change it when clients ask to put some-
thing else on - or if there’s a major sports game on.

In the beginning, I let it get to me. I couldn’t believe a store owner would
play politics like that with a station that factually gets the news wrong 80% of the
time (and there are numerous non-partisan reviews that verify Fox is wrong, mis-
leads or outright lies 80% of the time.) To be fair, the same reports find NBC to
mislead about 60% of the time. So in the beginning, I would ask to have the station
changed to the local news. Over time though, I just let it go and watched. I’ll read
the NY Times, and Washington Post for the same reason. And periodically hop
over to the BBC or other European news to see what we’re not being told.

What I see reading or listening to all these sources, is that the people that on-
ly read or tune into the station that matches their worldview, never hear what the
other side has to say in a way that expresses that view with integrity. I feel like this
is the major source of our nation’s swimming upstream over the past decade or
two. We don’t hear the other side’s points, and if we do, they’re shared in mocking
tones. It also oversimplifies complex situations because nuances of view are tossed
for the sound byte. We see this in NYC’s current struggle between the Mayor and some Police Union leadership.

It also tends to contribute to false balance - where one reasonable opinion is pitted against a ridiculous opinion as if they are equal in value. We most notably see this with reporting on Global Warming, where world scientific expert opinions are considered with equal “value” with politicians who have no scientific training and are relying on personal opinion and anecdote to challenge 98% of the scientific community’s consensus.

Pope Francis is expected to charge our world’s 1.2 billion Catholics to commit themselves to the Global Warming crisis after a trip to the hurricane-ravaged Philippines soon. And in September, he’s slated to speak to the UN General Assembly as plead for more serious action.\(^1\) If all of this happens as expected, it fills me with a deep sense of hope over this crisis that has felt like swimming upstream for so many of us.

However, if you heard it reported on Fox, the story was told very differently. In the most mind-numbing twisting of news I may have ever heard, the TV station reported that the Pope was going to call Catholics to action over Global Warming, but they described it as something that reinforced “some critics” concerns over “religious fervor” which has been the foundation for those that believe in climate change. Climate change - that which has 98% of world scientists in agreement - is now magically a sentiment of those with religious zeal. When in fact, it’s been strong religious groups who believe global warming is God’s will, and man had no influence on our planet, that have stalled some of our actions to remedy this crisis saying that we can’t flout God’s will, so let’s let it burn as the bible has foretold.

\(^{1}\) http://thinkprogress.org/climate/2014/12/28/3607083/pope-francis-climate-secret-weapon-next-year/
If desire is to need what we can’t have, and greed is to need what is readily available, and yearning is to need what is right, but not yet, then global warming brings out all three in us. Our desire for the myth of limitless resources without repercussion and our greed for that which we yet have so much of, are making our yearning for a world that is whole and balanced all the more difficult to realize.

As we begin a new year, and prepare to swim up whatever streams come our way from time to time, we should remember something about endurance. Sometimes the world is a difficult place, and sometimes our personal situation is very stark. But not everything is hopeless. Not everything is simple. And we often need to take a step back and look at the bigger picture, or tune into more than one voice. Our nation is wracked with many serious, or life threatening problems right now. But we also have many stories of success, change and transformation. Our national debt is declining drastically. For those who benefit from stocks, they’re soaring to record highs. Unemployment is down. We have movement away from some Cold War policies toward our nearest neighbor, while reaching out with environmental agreements with foreign powers. Ebola never spread here - not from ISIS, not through Mexico. And with Pope Francis expected to join his voice in world leadership toward serious climate action, things may look very different. When we yearn in difficult times, sometimes we need to remember not to listen too fully to the voices of strife and confusion; or at least not allow them to be the only voices we hear. When we only listen to them, our hearts and minds may not be ready to do the work of building upon the many successes the past year has gifted to this new year.