

“A Brand New Start”

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I am not a patient person by nature, but I’m learning slowly that if I practice a new behavior long enough, I finally pick up on what I’m trying to improve upon. But I tend to lose my patience at this time of year. I am also having trouble keeping my composure this year given what a wild ride 2017 has been, not just for me personally but for all of us collectively as a community and as a country.

A sermon during the winter holidays is a perfect opportunity for a little guilt from the pulpit about our consumer habits, about how much we spend, about how we should give more time and more money to the needy, and on and on.....but I thought about it while writing this sermon and I thought “you don’t need guilt, we get way too much of that. What you need, what I need, is care, and we each need much more care than you think. Well I, gentle listeners, am here to give it to you. I am here to give it to you as my own gift during the holiday season, and I give it to all of us and to myself, possibly to make me feel good about myself at a time of year when I find that both easy and very difficult. But I will get to that paradox later.

One of the metaphors that I have been giving a lot of thought to this past year was actually just celebrated a few days ago as a part of the Christian Church calendar, the Feast of the Holy Innocents. If you were in a christian church almost anywhere in the

world on Christmas Eve, you heard a reading from the Gospel according to Matthew, as he was telling the story of the wise men following a star to Bethlehem. After they had delivered their precious gifts to the baby Jesus, they left for their own country by a different road than the one they came by, having been warned in a dream not to return to King Herod. We will pick up the story there. A Reading from the Gospel according to Matthew 2:16-18:

When [the Magi] had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. Get up, he said, take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him.

So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night, and left for Egypt, where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: "Out of Egypt I called my son."

When Herod realised that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old or under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi. Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled: "A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more.

I can only imagine the wailing and loud lamentations coming from the mothers like Rachel weeping for her children. They must have been angry. They must have wanted to run away to escape this evil ruler. Many martyred in order to save the life of a hero is not an uncommon theme in mythic literature, and we have no reason to believe this actually happened. Matthew clearly has the Book of Jeremiah available to him when he wrote this gospel, and he uses many other tools of myth-making. Still, like most

myths, this story contains powerful truths. To martyr one person, or hundreds, or thousands for political or otherwise irrational reasons is very well known to human history. In my own lifetime, I have seen with my own eyes the slaughter of the innocents at Ramah and the wailing and loud lamentations of mothers like Rachel, and so have all of you.

This metaphor first occurred to me on a blustery fall day back in 1996 as I stood on a crowded, Washington DC metro subway early in the morning. I was on my way to see the last showing of the entire AIDS Quilt which was taking place that weekend. As we stopped at different stations headed toward the capitol, more and more people crowded on, mostly wearing t-shirts or buttons or red ribbons , identifying themselves as fellow pilgrims come to see our quilted shrine. At one stop, about ten middle-aged or older women all got on together. All of them were wearing quilt t-shirts, caps and buttons, and all seemed to be a part of the thousands who came to volunteer that weekend. But they also had something else in common. Each was wearing a button that said simply “I am proudly remembering my gay son”. I was so touched by them, these mothers from Ramah. Part of me wished that one of them had been my own mother, proud of my oldest brother Bobby who died of AIDS in 1993 and come to honor his memory.

We have just lived through a year of political, ethical, psychic and spiritual attacks; a year where basic human decency has been challenged throughout our own country. We worry about long-fought rights being taken away; we worry about healthcare for the poorest among us; about the need for more and better and cheaper education;

about the huge and growing divide between the haves and have-nots; about infant mortality and climate change and homelessness and taxation without representation and how we care for immigrants and dozens of other important issues including, right here in the richest country in the world, how to make sure the the children of Ramah that survived get a decent meal every day. As a member of a church and a religion known for it's commitment to Social Justice, I am tired. I am tired mentally and physically from worry. My soul hurts. My heart hurts. I want a brand new start.

The Brand New Start that we all dream of is a dream that we must always carry in our hearts and struggle to achieve. That is our call, that is why we do the work we do and gather in community to share it's joys and burdens. While we do that work, we must care for ourselves and each other, because we need that care and a part of us needs to share it as well.

My basic thesis at this particularly crazy time of this uniquely crazy year is this: real caring means first caring for ourselves, and then having some idea of why we should want to care for others. Why do we want to help? Whose helping agenda is it really? Are we healthy enough ourselves to be helpers? Only when we know these answers and know how to care for ourselves as unique and special creations of a magical universe can we in turn, in thankfulness, help to care for others. Caring is not one way, it is often mutual. But I am convinced that as we stand on the edge of moving from one scary year into another, caring for ourselves and each other in beloved community will be one way for us all to keep our strength and keep our sanity.

As a chaplain, I was asked some years ago to re-imagine the definition of pastoral care so it could be used more broadly with people for whom it might have too much of a christian history and context. Most health care professionals use the term Spiritual Care to describe what chaplains do nowadays, and the definition I came up with was this: “Spiritual Care is the attempt to help others through presence, acts, and relationships to experience as fully as possible the deep cosmic truth that the Universe welcomes and loves everyone and everything unconditionally”. Of course that’s a pretty Universalist definition as well, and it squares with what I consider spirituality to be; that is, whatever it is that you draw strength from that is bigger than you. Perhaps a church or a deity; perhaps being in nature; perhaps ethical living; perhaps your garden. In general, when we use the term “Spiritual Care” we are usually talking about people who are ill or otherwise need physical, mental, emotional, or spiritual support. But all of us need this kind of presence and care, so let me share with you some simple ways of providing it.

First, let me permanently and forever dispel the most disabling myth of all when it comes to helping people: the fear that you will say the wrong thing. I hereby and forever grant all of you here the authority and permission to never have to come up with the right thing to say! Let that tired old horse die here and now. The things you say when you are trying to be helpful are only words and trust me on this, you can fix them. People are much more resilient than you think.

Now, having said that, there is a better way to be with people who need your care anyhow, and that is simple presence. This is The Great Secret among those of us who are

ministers, chaplains or counselors.....no matter how much training we have or which psychological theory or school we subscribe to, that which we call the Ministry of Presence has a power to heal that you cannot imagine. Quietly listening, not interrupting, simply being comfortable with silence, letting the other person know you are hearing them, keeping an open posture, not being in a hurry.....all of these simple skills bring real benefit to people who need care....not to mention the benefit they can bring to your everyday relationships.

This sounds quite simple, this Ministry of Presence, but this is hard for some people. Some folks have difficulties with boundaries; some people have trouble working through their own co-dependence; and these things can very well interfere with their ability to be simply present. These are the people who should try to be caregivers and helpers in more indirect ways until they explore what those behaviors mean to them.

Another thing we need to think about when we talk about caring is that self-improvement movements and books of all kinds have done much to empower people, but they have also given them much information that they don't have the training or experience to integrate, and so while you're trying to be helpful and caring, I ask that you leave the book on self-empowerment or positive thinking or angels or auras or reincarnation or bright lights before death or other common movements at home. I believe in and subscribe to all of these things in one way or another, but I would rather challenge you to not underestimate the power of your simple and sacred presence.

The definition of Spiritual Care that I talked about earlier also included the words acts and relationships, and, of course, these are related to presence. In grief work, for example, perhaps the greatest gift a community can give to a grieving family is to do what the Amish do.....to meet their basic needs, to bring them dinner every night till they tell you to stop, in other words to make sure their everyday needs like food and laundry and companionship and transportation are being met. So presence is both a physical presence as well as stepping up to the plate to help with the dirty work.

I think one of the most important things to think about when we are caring for people that we are in relationships with is to not change because they have changed. Just because someone's personal situation has changed, don't call them less, don't care about them less, don't reach out to them less. Many of us UU's are very pragmatic people; we tend to not ask for help when we most need it. We would rather display our independence. But I think its important for us to remember the it is proper to reach out to other people to offer our help even if they can't ask for it. You might think it proper to bring this to the attention of your minister or a board member or someone on your pastoral care committee, but it is also okay to offer your caring face-to-face: a simple "How can I help you"?

In the end, there is really only one true way to prepare for caring for others, and that is the knowledge that caring for yourself is the first and most important step in caring for others. Know your limitations. Let your feelings be authentic in the moment, and don't think you have to hide them. Don't over-commit. Watch out for stress and burn out.

Be gentle with yourself. Accept yourself. However much you give, it is still a gift...and don't ever feel that you should have given more. Constantly reflect, alone and in groups, about why you are doing this caring. What are you taking from it, and what are you learning from it? Seek guidance when it hurts. And if you open yourself up to caring in any significant way, it will hurt. That's a part of the cycle of life. So reach out to others. Reach out to your ministers and close friends. And please remember that your learned ministers and closest friends can forget these important truths from time to time. So don't feel guilty when your forget them, too.

For me, taking care of myself at this time of year is an especially difficult challenge. The period between Thanksgiving and New Years Day is so wrapped up in mixed emotions for me. It seems like a paradox of disenchantment and re-enchantment. I always have such high expectations at this time of year.....for myself, for my community, for my family, for my country.....and so I tend to look for hope wherever I can find it. As a New Year dawns tomorrow, I want to fully embrace the words written long ago by The Rev. Dr. Howard Thurman, himself a veteran of the civil rights movement, and witness to both horrible injustices as well as the victories that can be won when good people come together to change the world. In some of the most difficult times of his life, he wrote these words about this time of the year:

When the song of the angels is stilled,

When the star in the sky is gone,

When the kings and princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flocks,
The real work of Christmas begins:
To find the lost,
To heal the broken,
To feed the hungry,
To release the prisoner,
To rebuild the nations,
To bring peace among the people,
To make music in the heart.

As you write your resolutions and make goals for the new year, as you ready yourself for a Brand New Start, I ask you to heed the words of Howard Thurman. Make yourself ready for the challenges that this new year will bring. But make sure you take the time to light a candle of self-love within your own heart, and then, in thanksgiving for the gifts of light and love that the Universe has shared with you, go out and share those gifts with others. Make music in the heart, and let that be your Brand New Start in the coming New Year.

In Your Many Holy Names We Pray, Amen.

Reference

Thurman, H. (n.d). When the song of the angels is stilled. Retrieved from:
<https://www.poemhunter.com/howard-thurman/>