"The Gift of Spiritual Companionship: Unitarian Universalist Pastoral Care and 'Non-Anxious Presence'"

There is a story from the Buddhist tradition[1] about a woman who gives birth to a beautiful little boy. She feels tremendous joy watching him grow through each stage, from infancy to toddlerhood and then youth and adolescence.

But one day, with no warning or explanation, her son dies. The woman is devastated, so distraught she cannot believe that her beloved child is truly dead. So begins her search for a medicine that will "cure" her son and revive him.

As she goes from door to door in her village, the townspeople greet her with confusion. "Your boy is dead," they say. "There is nothing that can bring him back." But then she comes to the door of the Buddha. When she asks him if he has a medicine that will cure her son, the Buddha says, "Yes. To make this tonic, you must bring me three mustard seeds." As she has seeds at her house, the mother turns toward the door to race home. But before she leaves, the Buddha adds, "These seeds must be from homes where no one has lost someone they love."

The mother goes from door to door again, this time asking for mustard seeds. As each neighbor reaches for their seeds, she adds the Buddha's qualification. "I cannot take your mustard seeds," she says, "if you have lost someone to death." Time and time again, her townspeople stop in their tracks, saying, "Then, sister, you must go to another home."

In time, the mother realizes that the profound sorrow she feels is part of being human, a sorrow shared by everyone the world over, a sorrow transcending time, caste and tribe. While her heart is still broken, she is comforted by the silent companionship of so many others who lost and grieved before her. In their company, her heart is made lighter.

I remembered this story as I enjoyed a sumptuous dinner with Paul and Vicky Strella. The three of us were talking about a sermon, this sermon, the one that Vicky and Paul won at our 2007 auction. We met for dinner so we could, in part, talk about my homiletic mission.

Paul took the lead in discussing my assignment for this morning. With a serious expression on his face he said, "Vicky and I would like you to consider the following question: 'Dog fighting – good or bad idea?'"

I replied that, as this would be a short sermon and as there were two sermon winners instead of one, I would grant them an additional sermon subject.

This lead to Paul's curiosity about life in the ministry. "Most church members don't have a full sense of what ministers do. For example, you are a minister of pastoral care. What is 'pastoral care?'"

As we spoke about the nature and practice of pastoral care, Vicky remembered a sermon that Roger preached about "non-anxious presence." "That sermon changed me," she said. "Now, when I am with friends who are going through hard times, I try to offer them 'non-anxious presence.' I would like to hear more about it."

Together, we decided that I should preach about pastoral care and "non-anxious presence." And we concluded that dog fighting is a very bad idea.

---

[1] http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/hecker/wheel292.html

In the story about the woman and the mustard seeds, the sudden death of her son is so painful that she can no longer think straight. The reality that her son is dead is so hard to accept that the mother becomes delusional, thinking that her child is merely sick.

This is the way of profound grief. A basic understanding of pastoral care is the reality that those who are in distress are not always logical, but their confusion is normal.

The first significant loss I experienced was the death of my mother in 2004. I am forever thankful that Sue, my friend and colleague, was there when I began dealing with this loss. Sue serves as a hospice chaplain, a ministry grounded in her own experience of losing her life partner to cancer.

When Sue learned of my loss, she pulled me aside and said, gently, “You are going on a ride.” Sue meant that my feelings would be erratic, my thinking foggy, my body subject to symptoms rooted in my sorrow – insomnia, anxiety, tension. In retrospect, I know that Sue was right.

I have heard similar stories from you about what it is like to face a serious illness or a huge loss. One person who lost his mother compared the intensity of his feelings to what it was like to experience his first breakup as a teenager. Another person said, at the reception for his wife’s memorial service, he was “living through his biggest nightmare.”

When we are in emotional pain, when we or someone we love is facing a serious illness, we feel a great distance between ourselves and the everyday life going on around us. In this remote place, it is hard to remember what everyday life feels like or to even believe that we will ever return. And because those around us are fearful of “saying the wrong thing” or because our own devastation triggers bad feelings in them, it is common for people to keep their distance from us when we grieve, in a time already made profoundly lonely by loss.

Pastoral care is a ministry focused on lessening this isolation. Pastoral care is the practice of meeting people in distress with “unconditional regard or unconditional love.” Pastoral care is a ministry grounded in the belief that we can care for the anguished not by trying to remove their pain but keeping them company as they live through it.

In Unitarian Universalism, with our lack of consensus about the divine, the religious element of pastoral care ministry is complex. When I visit a congregant in the hospital who I know is an atheist, I often consider Tom McReady’s question – for myself as a minister and for our friend in the hospital bed - “Whom do you pray to if you believe in prayer but do not believe in God?”

While the precise nature of the divine is unknown, we can still offer spiritual companionship. Like my classmate who wrote this morning’s reading, I too served as a hospital chaplain. I learned to sit at the bedsides of patients and listen to their concerns, their feelings, and questions. The visit usually concluded with my holding the patient’s hand and leading us in a prayer reflecting the personal content of our conversation.

I don’t know if the patients thought that our words were going directly to God. But, what was most important to me was my hope that the prayer reflected their needs, the matters of their heart. If the prayer reached nothing but our own ears, I wanted to communicate to the patient that they were heard, their fears were articulated, they were not alone in their pain. I wanted to be with them without a therapeutic agenda, as more of a mirror bearing witness to their life and naming the profound truths within it.

Hence, providing pastoral care in a Unitarian Universalist community is the same as providing pastoral care as a hospital chaplain, with the exception that my visits don’t usually end in prayer – although I love prayer and will

pray with anyone who wants to pray with me. In my pastoral conversations with Unitarian Universalists, I try to be someone who listens, someone who recognizes feelings as normal and regards them with respect, someone who doesn't try to change the other person but understands their experience and who keeps them company, wherever they may be. As Paul Strella said over dessert and coffee, in Unitarian Universalist pastoral care, "Maybe the conversation before the prayer *is* the prayer."

Prayer of all kinds begins with listening – listening to our inner lives and to the experiences of others. When we listen in pastoral care, we "hear another person into speech," as feminist theologian Nelle Morton might say. We listen in such a way that invites our companions to discover and reveal what they carry in their heart.

To be a good listener one must be able to connect with someone else but not be so attached that our presence overpowers the conversation. Borrowing a metaphor from a mentor, one must be like an Asian watercolor painter: If you don't press hard enough, you do not make a mark. If you press too hard, you rip through the paper.

To be a good listener, one must remain calm and centered no matter how distraught or angry the other person becomes. One must engage with another completely, without an agenda of our own, without an expectation that our needs will be met by the conversation. One must offer what is called "non-anxious presence."

The term "non-anxious presence" comes out of a school of thought called "family systems theory." Murray Bowen developed this way of thinking after trying a unique experiment: While treating schizophrenic patients, Bowen institutionalized the patient *and* the patient's family. By observing family dynamics, he came to understand mental illness not as an individual malady but a symptom of dysfunction within a group.

A local rabbi, Edwin Friedman, then applied Bowen's ideas to congregational life, encouraging clergy to understand a congregation as a dynamic, interrelated system. Friedman's influence on religious leadership is immeasurable. One Baptist minister was known to proclaim that "Jesus Christ saved my soul but Ed Friedman saved my ass."

Friedman defines anxiety as a chronic, contagious condition. When anxiety increases in a system, we easily get caught in its momentum. Effective leaders regulate their own anxiety and engage with the system in a measured way, rooted in a defined sense of their own self. Friedman claims that effective leadership is defined more by how you are than what you do.[2]

Practicing "non-anxious presence" in an environment of great anxiety is easier said than done; the most effective leaders can reach only fifty percent of their capacity.[3] Or, as some of my colleagues say, sometimes the best we can offer is "anxious non-presence."

It is difficult to illustrate "non-anxious presence" as it is more an experience than an idea. Like Supreme Justice Potter Stewart's definition of obscenity, it is hard to define but "I know it when I see it."[4]

I see "non-anxious presence" when, in the story about the woman and the mustard seeds, the Buddha does not react to her delusion but instead joins her way of thinking and calmly asks her to find three seeds from homes that have not known loss.

[2] *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix*, 26
[3] *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue*
[4] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/I_know_it_when_I_see_it

I saw “non-anxious presence” when, in my ordination service, held less than a year after my mother’s death, the small candle we lit to invoke her presence in this rite-of-passage went out and someone in the chancel -- to this day, I don’t know who -- found another candle to light in its place before I entered the pulpit.

“Non-anxious presence” is illustrated in a story that one of you told me about going to the hospital for treatment for what turned out to be a collapsed lung. In this foreign and sterile place, with doctors and other patients all around, struggling to take in enough oxygen, one of the lab technicians leaned down and whispered, “We know what is wrong. You are going to be all right.”

And “non-anxious presence” is found in people of all ages. Another couple also lost their son quite suddenly, when he was still a young adult. This man – whom we’ll call Steve – died before his young nieces and nephews could get to know him.

A couple of years later, one of Steve’s nephews, Bill, sat down and drew an entire page full of the letter “B.” He walked up to his grandma, picked up a roll of tape and said, “Come on, follow me.” Young Bill brought his grandmother a block down the street, to the park where they had erected a memorial bench in Steve’s name. Bill then said to his grandmother, “I wanted to show Uncle Steve that I have learned to write” and taped his page of Bs to the bench.

With this calm and quiet gesture, Bill recognized Steve as an active member of the family even though, like the son in the Buddhist story, there was no way to bring him back to life. In this moment Bill’s grandmother, Steve’s mother “turned a corner” in her grief. This moment was a moment of “non-anxious presence.”

When I imagine the woman in the story of the mustard seeds going door-to-door, trying to collect seeds from homes that have not suffered losses, I imagine one of her neighbors replying to her request, “Then, sister, you must go to another home. But, before you go, let me make you some tea.” As he hands her a mug of hot tea, he sits next to her, slowly takes her other hand and says, “Tell me about your child.”

The mother tells a long rambling story, from the first days of her son’s life to his mysterious death and back again, stories of a parent’s deep love and anger, sadness and confusion about his death. The mother speaks quietly, she yells, she weeps. When her story is done and the tea is gone, the neighbor rises from his chair and then returns to the table with a small cloth. “Here,” he says. “My wife died three winters ago. When she left, I was so devastated it was like I became someone else. I never knew when the tears would come so I always had to carry a cloth to wipe them away. I want you to have this.”

I imagine that, while the mother does not find the three mustard seeds that will bring her beloved child back to life, she finds “non-anxious presence” – a calm companion present to her pain, unafraid of her anger and grief, a companion who draws from his own experience only in service to her comfort, a companion who seeks not to change her or rationalize her feelings away but to help her find words for this strange place in which she has found herself.

Whether there is a god who hears these words or just her human, mortal companion, either way the mother leaves this man’s kitchen with a cloth in her pocket to catch her future tears, feeling heard, feeling seen, understanding that she will not live through this “hard night” alone.

When it is our time to be in need of pastoral care and “non-anxious presence,” may all of us know the gift of spiritual companionship. May it be so.