

“When in Need”

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I am a Pastoral Care Associate, but I am speaking today as a recipient of pastoral care.

A year ago, I had surgery on my shoulder. It was not serious but because of my physical difficulties on my left side, recovery was not going to be easy. I was panicked. For me, losing more control over my physical functioning was frightening. My reaction was to take control over the rest of my life, especially my emotions.

I spent a lot of energy pushing people away, rather than admit my vulnerability. At that time, I made a conscious decision to put that wasted energy (pushing people away) to figure out what I needed. As I figured this out, I could verbalize what would be helpful but “more importantly”, what was not helpful. This lessened my anxiety and put me in the driver’s seat and to remain in control over what I needed.

I shared my challenges in our PCA meetings and I also met with Heather. Sharing my worst fears made them less scary to me. I could go on, but I was only given three minutes. I talked with Heather about what I would share today, but I left one part out.

My experiences with Heather led me to the conclusion that no matter what this job throws at her, she remains unfrazzled. At the end our session, Heather offered a healing prayer. I had one request. I asked her to sing the prayer. The look on her face was priceless. It was worth receiving pastoral care to experience that moment. Heather rose to the occasion and sang a prayer.

What I want to leave you with today is this: If life throws you a curveball (and for me, it is when, not if)

Allow this community to support you.

Know this your privacy will be respected.

Know that you determine what is helpful and what is not helpful.

This is one way to bring you some peace, while giving you more energy to deal with the situation that you are facing.

Thank you.

“Blessings Between Us”

The Rev. Heather Janules

There is truth in what the Buddhists teach us: the only constant in human life is change.

Transitions from one state to another, rites-of-passage, dwell at the heart of a minister’s life. This is true for me. Just yesterday, I had the honor of officiating the wedding between David Hyde and Dawn Rogers, the son and now daughter-in-law of Mike and Barbara Hyde. Next Sunday, I will have the joy of participating in a ceremony of Dedication, formally welcoming little Cora McVey into life and into this faith community.

But sometimes ministers are on the other side of rites-of-passage. And, as we know, sometimes human passages are informal, near invisible and painful.

One such crossroads in my life was the death of my mother. As I've shared with many, one of the most important moments in my bereavement after her early death was something the facilitator of my grief support group said: “There are two kinds of people in the world - those who have lost a loved one and...‘the clueless.’”

At some point, all of us transition from the circle of the clueless to the circle of those who know profound grief. And, if asked, many of us would choose to stay clueless if we could. When we first grieve the death of a loved one, we also lose much of our innocence, the sense of living in a world where love and stability are reliable.

How I wish becoming a minister rendered me immune from this transition, this difficult rite-of-passage. But one reason I am a Unitarian Universalist is I believe that clergy are not superhuman but simply human, merely people with a unique sense of call and commitment to the life of the spirit.

When we lose our cluelessness, whether through the death of a loved one or a serious illness or a traumatic transition like divorce or job loss, that is often when we need community the most. And, because it is also human nature to feel uncertain about how to care for another when they are suffering, friends and family often distance themselves from us in those times. Because others don't know what to do or what to say, those of us in personal pain often feel more isolated than when our lives are easy and pleasant.

We hear this truth in the story of Sheryl Sandberg. Known for her book *Lean In* and her professional success as the Chief Operating Officer of Facebook, Sandberg's public platform gave her an opportunity to share the reality of personal suffering when her young husband, David, died unexpectedly. In her memoir, *Option B: Facing Adversity, Building Resilience and Finding Joy*, Sandberg recalls, "I couldn't understand when friends didn't ask me how I was. I felt invisible, as if I were standing in front of them but they couldn't see me. When someone shows up with a cast, we immediately inquire, 'What happened? If your ankle gets shattered, people ask to hear the story. If your life gets shattered, they don't."<sup>1</sup>

The moments when "our lives get shattered" are when we need pastoral care. Pastoral care is simply the ministry of offering a calm and caring presence, the practice of active listening, of simply having someone bear witness to our struggle and our uncertainty. Pastoral care is a caring relationship free of unsolicited advice or judgment.

Anyone who has sought to care for someone who is suffering knows how difficult and vulnerable it can be to both give and receive this kind of care. And just as ministers are not immune to experiencing human struggles in life, we are also not immune to feeling inadequate to the task of offering pastoral ministry.

I remember a story one of my colleagues, Patrick O'Neill, once shared in a sermon. He was kind enough to send me his story so I might share it with you.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/51953783-option-b-facing-adversity-building-resilience-and-finding-joy>

O'Neill was a student chaplain, serving in a hospital. As he recalls, one night he was asked to visit an elderly Baptist woman the evening prior to her surgery. He writes:

I was the quintessential wet-behind-the-ears minister-in-formation at the time... And here I was...wearing a clerical collar and a nametag that identified me to the world as Chaplain O'Neill. Some Chaplain! A Chaplain who didn't know what he believed or didn't believe about God or himself or what he was doing or why.

I paused at the door of the hospital room and...introduced myself as the chaplain in case the four-inch nametag wasn't big enough, and in my best Rogerian listening style, tried to get the woman to talk to me about what was on her mind. Nothing worked...Finally, I asked her if there was anything at all I could do for her. She looked at me straight on and said, "Would you say a prayer for me right now?"

And I was stuck. I knew...that theologically, that old woman and I were light years apart, and...any prayer I might be able to stutter forth from my agnostic Unitarian heart of that moment was not likely to offer much comfort to her Baptist soul

In a moment of...inspiration?...desperation? - I said, "...Let's you and I hold hands, and you say the words of the prayer." So we did. And...off she went. "Lord, I know you hear my prayer now, because I have your man the Reverend here with me...Here's all I'm asking of you, God: I'm frightened, Lord... I'm only asking you for courage...I can take whatever your Will is for me, God. I'm just asking you to make me unafraid, so I can do this with dignity. I'm asking you in Jesus' name. Thank you. Amen."

O'Neill concludes:

...I have never said Amen...with more sincerity than I did at the end of that woman's prayer. "Thank you, Reverend," she said with tears coming down her cheeks. "I needed that prayer," she said. So did I, I told her. So did I.

For me, this story is a story about the democracy of pastoral care. The woman he visited found meaning in the oversized chaplain badge he wore and also knew, much more than he, what ministry she needed in that moment. The pastoral imagination requires neither badge nor clerical collar to be real.

And I am reminded of the paradoxical simplicity of pastoral care through a story shared by one of my predecessors, The Rev. Mary Harrington. Betsy Bowles, a congregational leader who worked closely with Mary, recalls Mary's account of learning how to be an effective pastoral care provider, also in the early days of her ministry. Betsy writes:

It was her first day on the job. A wonderful congregant had died; he was old but as you know being prepared for a loved one's death does not make it any easier.

His widow sat alone in the...living room and the young minister quietly went in and sat beside her. She slipped her hand beneath the soft...hand of the widow and said "I am so, so sorry, I wish I had known him better". The truth was she hardly knew either one of the couple.

The room was quiet but soon the widow began to recite many of the things that had been worth knowing about the deceased. Important things; like [how] he showed his love for her when they first met, the music [that touched] his soul, his sense of good and evil and his final wishes for his loved ones. [Mary] only listened.

20 minutes...went by. The widow lifted her hand from above the minister's. That's how the minister knew her time was up. She gently embraced the widow and left....wondering if her visit has been a success or a complete failure.

Later, [Mary] heard how the widow recounted the visit to her circle of friends in the church...:

"You will never know what a help Mary was to me the day John died. She knew exactly what to say and how to give me the comfort I needed. What a treasure. She is an angel."

Betsy concludes:

That's who these people here are - treasures and angels. We must never forget what they do and thank them for knowing what is needed sometimes before it is spoken.

I draw from all these stories - my first profound odyssey with grief, Patrick O'Neill's clumsy yet grace-filled encounter with the hospital patient and Mary Harrington's illustration of the simple power of pastoral presence – for a few truths. While pastoral presence is difficult to offer, in the end it does not take much to communicate to someone they are not alone in their suffering. The opportunity - and some would say the responsibility - to offer this care lives with all of us: chaplain and patient; minister and congregant; member and member; stranger and stranger. The call to manifest blessings between us knows no titles, no age limit, no theological boundary. And when the call is answered, there can be a healing that transcends words and human understanding.