

“There is a Love Holding Us’: Celebrating Pastoral Ministry
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The September equinox is the precise time when the sun appears to cross the celestial equator, heading southward. The sun as viewed from the equator rises due east and sets due west.

Across generations and around the world, the solstices and equinoxes have marked the boundaries of seasons. For us in the Northern Hemisphere, the Southward equinox represents the threshold where summer ends and autumn begins. This year, the equinox comes tomorrow on the 23rd. Thus, we are gathered on the last day of summer. If there is any doubt, pay attention to the new morning chill in the air and the sudden need to again dress in layers¹

“For everything there is a season and a time for every purpose under heaven.” Perhaps these words from Ecclesiastes are so enduring as the metaphor – the cycles of human life – being born and dying, planting and harvesting, weeping and dancing – are so like the cycles of the seasons. For I remember days in the deepest of winter when the ferocity of the bitter cold seemed like it would last forever only to eventually give way to brutal heat in summer. As the arc of a year includes extremes of cold and hot, dark and light, hibernation and flourishing, the arc of a life is certain to include its own extremes. “For everything there is a season...” is scripture as to live through profoundly divergent seasons is at the heart of the human experience.

If you attended worship here last Sunday, you heard the story of a man living through a profound season in his life as he was diagnosed with an inoperable brain tumor. As this man, Patrick Doherty, is a husband and father, we know he has also lived through other, more joyous times.

Patrick Doherty’s gift to us is affirming that should modern medicine fail, we can always seek “spiritual solutions” to our crises. As he said, his doctor told him that her “tools” could not resolve the issue so he felt free to seek another way. Today, as we celebrate those who have answered a call to pastoral ministry, I invite us to reflect upon the possibility of transformation through simple human connection. I

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/September_equinox

invite us to consider how, through the quiet art of offering presence to another without fear or judgment, we can serve as part of someone's "spiritual solution" to their suffering.

I am grateful that we are exploring "expectation" this month as this theme has encouraged me to approach the question of what it means to offer presence to another from a new perspective, beyond what we might expect. As Emily Dickinson might say, I have become inspired to tell the truth about pastoral care "at a slant."²

When I speak of a pastoral visit, you might imagine something like this: Someone has experienced something difficult. She has just learned that her partner of many years is leaving with no warning and little explanation. Or he has been sitting at the bedside of his spouse who, the hospice workers tell him, has not weeks but days to live. They have invested many years and much hard work towards a degree only to discover after many attempts that no one will hire them. The person in deep struggle is, understandably, upset. Perhaps they are feeling hurt, devastated by the grief before them and the grief that is to come or angry. Perhaps there are no words to truly name their experience. Either way, they are not eating well or sleeping much. They are in great pain.

Enter the pastoral care provider. As they are not in such a season themselves, they come with clear thinking and a stability the person in crisis lacks. The person speaks and the pastoral companion listens, not just in the literal sense but for what is said between the lines. The provider of care listens with both their ears and their heart. The care provider resists responding with easy platitudes. When the time is right and with the blessing of the other, they offer some wisdom from their own life experience.

In subtle but important ways, both have been changed by the conversation. When it is time to part, the two discuss what comes next, perhaps coordinating practical support or another visit in a week or so. End scene.

Many pastoral exchanges include a thread of this narrative. And there is so often more to the story. Here is where we tell the truth "at a slant."

² <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/56824/tell-all-the-truth-but-tell-it-slant-1263>

When we think about someone navigating a life crisis, it is easy to make assumptions about their state of being. If one is so distraught they can't think straight, it is easy to consider them helpless. If we are immobilized by fear and uncertainty, we might conclude we are weak. And, as mainstream culture teaches us that all broken things can be fixed and they who fix them on their own are to be celebrated, it is easy to assume the pastoral care provider can solve the other's problems because they, dwelling in a place of temporary stability, have access to all the answers.

Almost fifteen years of pastoral ministry have taught me these assumptions are often false and even harmful. Let's imagine another, very different pastoral visit. Or an attempted one.

In every pastoral care training I lead, I share wisdom given to me by one of my mentors. He told me that if I went to someone's hospital room and asked if they wanted a visit and they responded by throwing a bed pan at my head, I have still provided pastoral care. For in the hospital, perhaps inhibited by injury or illness and in a space where people come and go at all hours, interacting with our bodies in sometimes unpleasant ways, patients have little control over their lives. But that does not mean they are helpless. To receive someone's rejection, in itself a testament to their agency and indelible self, is to serve as a partner in their humanity, no matter how unpleasant it might be to hear someone say "no" to the offer of our company.

And sometimes the patient who is suffering becomes the one to comfort others. In the same audio documentary in which we meet Patrick Doherty, we also meet Eli Goldberg or "Rabbi G" to the kids. Rabbi Goldberg founded an organization called Kids Kicking Cancer which teaches children in cancer treatment spiritual principles through martial arts.

The origin of Rabbi Goldberg's service to children with cancer began with the death of his own daughter. In an interview, he recalls his daughter's journey with leukemia which, at the time, included profoundly debilitating treatments. Sometimes the only place she could find physical comfort was lying on his chest. And, despite her own pain, this toddler was aware and sensitive to the experience of others. As they lay there together, sometimes she would comfort him, saying, "It's okay, Abba." Rabbi G remembers his little girl as a very "powerful" person.

Finding strength in the most physically vulnerable people around us is part of the legacy of her very short life.

And, yes, when one approaches another to offer care, companionship and support, they may have an easier time in day-to-day functioning than the one in crisis but they do not have “the answer.” The resolution of one’s problem, the salve to one’s grief, is an individual and personal quest to which we are sometimes trusted with limited access and influence.

It is always humbling to be welcomed into someone’s life, even for a moment. I often feel my own vulnerability in these times as I am aware of how much I need to unlearn the message that I must make this person’s life better through my efforts or even that this is possible. I must instead hold fast to the reality that it is very easy to say The Wrong Thing and to violate a core principle of pastoral care, borrowed from the medical field – “Do no harm.”

Another touchstone story we explore in pastoral care training is the account of a professional hospital chaplain visiting with the family member of a man in ICU. He had been injured in an industrial accident, barely surviving electrocution. Sitting in a hospital conference room with the man’s wife, the chaplain wanted to acknowledge the confusion and disbelief she must be feeling. So, in a gentle voice, he turned to her and said, “You must be shocked.” File this story under “we can’t make this stuff up.”

The moral of this story of saying The Wrong Thing is that even those who are highly trained and entrusted with both the care and teaching of others sometimes reveal their all-too fallible, clumsy, thoughtless natures. So often pastoral care providers are reminded that we are the ones with limited power, limited grace, limited wisdom. We include ourselves with those who are uncertain and afraid, wanting to remain safely on the side of “doing no harm” and recognizing that not bringing enough of ourselves to the moment would mean having no affect at all.

So what is the essence of pastoral care? It is a cliché but pastoral care is simply “showing up.” It is, through the evidence of our presence, affirming that the one who is struggling is not alone. Better yet, it is honoring that we are here together, equal in our capacity for strength and frailty, confusion and confidence. To everything and for everyone, there is a season.

When I think of pastoral care in its simplest terms, the word that comes to mind is “encounter.” At least two human beings come together and we are changed through the alchemy of our connection, hopefully for the better.

I am grateful to my colleague Keith Goheen who serves as a hospital chaplain. In the anthology *Called to Care: Essays by Unitarian Universalist Chaplains*, Rev. Goheen illustrates a pastoral visit with a young man, standing by his mother’s hospice bed. With just his words, as if he were scripting a film, Goheen conveys both the subtlety and power of the pastoral encounter. He writes:

Standing just inside the door of the hospital room, I grow aware of old feelings and memories of loss and dying....I remember the stories of other sons and gather the energy of those memories into my body. Moving toward [the young man,] I bring this energy as a spiritual gift, a healing balm distilled from the experiences of those have made this journey before him. As I move deeper into the space, listening, affirming and comforting as one human soul to another, the force of a tempest begins to subtly change. Within the hour, feelings in the room will be very different. The healing will have begun.³

This account speaks to what is at the heart of being “not alone.” When one tends to another’s pain, the caregiver may be a witness to the sufferer’s history of resilience. They may be, through the magic of imagination, an ambassador from the future, from a time in the cloudy distance when the struggle has been transformed into memory, albeit leaving a permanent imprint on the life story. These roles do not ask us to change reality. They do not ask us to be any wiser or smarter than we are. They simply ask us to affirm that we are not alone in this world and evidence that anyone is weak or helpless or beyond hope is subject to further scrutiny. They serve as an expression of the spiritual truth that “there is a love holding us,” no matter how distant or abstract this love might seem.

One pastoral visit taught me many of these lessons. I once served as a student chaplain in a busy trauma hospital. I was asked to visit a woman preparing for surgery. As I walked towards her room, I assumed I would hear about her health,

³ Goheen, Rev. Keith. “Tending the Soul’s Bones” in *The Call to Care: Essays by Unitarian Universalist Chaplains*. Skinner House Books: Boston, MA, 79.

her worries about whether she would survive the procedure and, if she did, what the “new normal” of her life would be.

When I arrived and sat in a chair at the edge of her bed, I met a white woman who was likely in her late sixties or early seventies. Early in the conversation though it became clear that she was not afraid. She was downright mad.

This woman called the chaplain because even though she had her own medical concerns, she was thinking about her son. After a long history of drug abuse, he finally got his life together. Sober and stable, he fell in love and married. Only then he was diagnosed with a fast-moving disease. As she lay in her Chicago hospital bed, he lay in a hospice unit in Texas. How could God do this? She needed a chaplain to give God a serious talking to.

In our conversation, I drew from my own beliefs to propose a different approach. If there is a God, God hears all our prayers, not just those of clergy. I encouraged her to pray her truth because “God can take it.” So she let loose a prayer that should not be repeated in polite company.

In retrospect, I said and did very little besides encouraging this woman to be honest about her rage and her pain and to be honest with the One who was, to her, its source – God. She was neither weak nor helpless. And I had no way to keep her son alive or to remove the sting of betrayal burning in her heart. I was simply a faithful witness to her fierce maternal power and her courage to speak her truth to life.

Soon, we will enter into a new season and, with this turning, comes a fading of the sun’s light. But despite the coming dark and cold, memories of warmer times remind us that seasons come in cycles.

And this is how it is with us fragile and resilient human souls. Today I celebrate that, at all times and in all seasons of human experience, there is a light within, tiny sparks that grow when we connect and, through this simple bond, remind each other that we are not alone. For “there is a love holding us.” We can rest in this love.