

In Need of Comfort

A Sermon for the Unitarian Universalist Society of Amherst

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If there is an eternal question for which there has never been an adequate answer, or at least one that we're happy with, it must be the question about pain, suffering, and death. Thomas Moore writes "The greatest of all mysteries is the role of suffering, ignorance, failure, illness and death in human life." (The Education of the Heart, p. 249)

Almost every week, in our Joys and Concerns, or in the reading I give as a pastoral response, there is mention of many of the pain in our lives. I don't want to dwell too much this morning on the details of what these things are, or could be, because we have all experienced them or witnessed others in their most difficult times. These are the moments that flavor our lives in a certain way, not necessarily to our liking. Our problems can take our minds and hearts away from the rest of our lives – they can become, in fact, all consuming. We can find ourselves at a loss for meaning, lost in self-absorption.

Yet somehow we're not usually ready to give it all up, are we? There must be something to be said about "being here," that makes us reluctant, in the end, to leave.

Here is an old joke told by Woody Allen (The Education of the Heart, p. 253): "Two elderly women are at a Catskills mountain resort, and one of them says, 'Boy, the food at this place is really terrible.' The other one says, 'Yeah, and such small portions.' Well, that's essentially how I feel about life. Full of loneliness and misery and suffering and unhappiness, and it's all over much too quickly."

Even if we live to that "ripe old age" stage, whatever that means, somehow it's rarely long enough.

But what are we to do in the moments, or days, months, or years when the pain of being human is upon us? How do we cope? Where do we find comfort? If a little rain and pain must fall into each and every life, and we know it does, then it must follow that providing umbrellas and comfort is big business. The trick is to discern the responsible "vendors" of comfort from those that prey on us in our weaker moments and leave us with only more pain in the end. Like drugs and alcohol, or other obsessive behaviors perceived as escapism, done to the exclusion of dealing with real life or the source of the pain in the first place.

Where do people find a little comfort? In comfort food like macaroni and cheese and chocolate. A nice soak in a hot tub. A walk in the woods or listening to beautiful music. I've known people, usually women, for whom a good shopping trip does the comfort trick for a minor upset. Almost any of these can be taken to excess if you aren't watching yourself.

With the first anniversary of 9-11 came a lot of remembering and an upwelling of submerged fear in many of us. I was living near Boston, and I can remember being nervous every time I heard a small plane flying overhead. I was still wondering what changes were coming to our country and to the world in the wake of what seemed like a defining moment.

I wasn't looking for comfort, or for hope particularly, but I found it that September 11, 2002, in my mailbox at the church where I was working. It was a request for a child dedication ceremony – and in the sudden excitement and prospect of that joyful ritual with a little boy and his family, I realized that the natural rhythms of life were very comforting. To be reminded of the miracle of continuing life brought me hope, and in hope I found comfort.

There are many different ways to be comforted in a world that desperately needs it. Traditionally, religious faith has been a major source of comfort to many around the world. To believe that there is an unwavering source of strength on which to draw is very appealing. Emily Dickinson wondered in this excerpt from one of her letters about the source of that strength: “What shall we do my darling, when trial grows more, and more, when the dim, lone light expires, and it's dark, so very dark, and we wander, and know not where, and cannot get out of the forest – whose is the hand to help us, and to lead, and forever guide us, they talk of a “Jesus of Nazareth,” will you tell me if it be he?” (Education of the Heart, p. 270)

Having faith that you are totally and unconditionally loved can be very comforting. Paul Tillich put it this way: “Sometimes a wave of light breaks into our darkness, and it is as though a voice were saying: ‘You are accepted. You are accepted, accepted by that which is greater than you, and the name of which you do not know. Do not seek for anything; do not perform anything; do not intend anything. Simply accept the fact that you are accepted.’” (Education of the Heart, p. 264)

For many, and perhaps for you, this acceptance comes from God or Jesus. I interpret Tillich's comments, however, as suggesting it is possible to feel accepted by something less specific, un-named and undefined, perhaps the Universe itself. Tillich himself defined God as “the ground of being.” For myself, my feeling of acceptance comes from being held by the Universe, held within infinite relationships that “know” I am there because what I do makes a difference. My presence is felt by all that is, and I feel held in that All, by the ground of being. It's perhaps a more difficult unconditional love to wrap one's mind around, or to find comfort in, but for those of us who cannot believe in the traditional concept of God, it can be comforting nonetheless.

Here is one thing I do not find comforting in times of pain: the notion that these times in our lives are somehow learning experiences that are put before us as trials to further our growth as human beings. Oh baloney. Cancer, for example, is not inserted into our lives because we haven't yet come to a serious sense of our own mortality. These things just happen. We may feel that we understand life a little more completely after some of our more trying experiences, but that is the paradox of suffering, not the purpose.

And, just as most of the good things in our lives are undeserved, so too are the bad things. Just because you smoked and then got lung cancer does not mean you deserve to suffer for your mistake. Just because you never did a bad thing in your life or ever said a hurtful word does not mean you deserve to die painlessly in your sleep. There is just no deserving about any of it. Stuff, as they say, happens.

Some of you may have heard me encourage you, in times of grief or disappointment, to allow yourselves some moments of joy among the many moments of sadness. The key here is in the allowing yourself time away from your problems to be reminded of the infinite goodness, joy, and beauty that is also a part of our real and complete human lives. Joy is always waiting, albeit in the wings sometimes, for our return.

There was a defining moment for me, some years back, in my pastoral formation. Our lecturer was a Hospice chaplain who worked with children. He told us of one particular child with whom he could not seem to make a helpful connection, no matter what he tried. The young girl was old enough to know what was happening to her with her illness, even though her family insisted on maintaining a positive outlook. They were understandably in denial. But the little girl knew she was going to die. Finally the chaplain gave her a piece of paper and suggested she draw a picture of what would feel good to her in that moment. All she drew was two people holding hands. So he held her hand – and she was no longer alone with her fear.

Sometimes the greatest gift we can give another person, the most comfort we can offer, is to hold their hand in ours, to put a hand on their arm, or an arm around their shoulder. Mingle your tears with theirs.

Sometimes the greatest gift we can give ourselves is to put out our own hand to be held.

Answers are hard to come by, but comfort is there for the reaching.