

How Can I Help?

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First Parish in Brookline

Meditation:

Take a moment to remember (in a sense) or imagine a time when someone is truly listening to you, with a relaxed presence, a slowness of response, eyes and ears and heart listening to your words, your story, your heart.

Remember or imagine a time when another person is simply present with you.

And as you remember — Notice your sense of time as the listening deepens.
And as you remember — Notice your sense of space as the listening deepens.
And as you remember — Notice your sense of self as the listening deepens.

And as we enter the silence together, let this be a time of gratitude for the listeners among us, a time of gratitude for loving presence, a time of gratitude for the healing heart.

Reading: "How Can I Help?"

Ram Dass

Ram Dass founded the Seva Foundation, a vehicle for compassionate service as a spiritual practice. In an effort to address the issues all of us face when called upon to care for one another, he conducted interviews with many sort of helpers — professional and volunteer. They told stories that lift up the powerful wisdom at the heart of helping. This is one of my favorite stories from that collection:

I have a friend, a chemotherapy nurse in a children's cancer ward, whose job it is to pry for any available vein in an often emaciated arm to give infusions of chemicals that sometimes last as long as twelve hours and which are often quite discomfoting to the child.

He is probably the greatest giver the children meet in their stay in the hospital. Because he has worked so much with his own pain, his heart is very open. He works with his responsibilities in the hospital as a "laying on of hands with love and acceptance." There is little in him that cause him to withdraw, that reinforces the painfulness of the experience for the children. He is a warm, open space which encourages them to trust whatever they feel. And it is he whom the children most often ask for at the time they are dying. Although he is the main pain-giver, he is also the main love-giver.

Hymn: #127 Can I See Another's Woe?

Sermon:

Can I see another's woe, and not be in sorrow too? The answer is 'yes' *and* 'no.'

It is in my design as a human being for my brain to mirror the feelings of those around me and somehow I manage to read the front page of the newspaper without dissolving into a pool of helpless tears.

We know that newborn infants cry more when they hear another newborn cry and we know that they do not cry more to the sound of an adult crying or the sound of a vacuum cleaner. Humans are designed to be compassionate, to feel empathy. And still we grow up and some of us step over the homeless and hungry on the way to our important lives.

Researchers at UCLA found that pain neurons in the adult human brain, which normally fire when you poke the patient with a needle, will also fire when the patient watches another patient being poked. "The mirror neurons, it would seem, dissolve the barrier between self and others." Neurologist V. S. Ramachandran calls them "empathy neurons" or "Dalai Lama neurons."¹

And despite the human capacity to feel another's pain we allow our government to defend the use of torture on our fellow human beings. Can we see another's woe? Yes, and no...

Hearing how our brains are wired to experience each other's pain reminds me of a story: A little boy arrived home late and explained to his concerned parents that he had stopped to help a friend who had broken his bicycle. His father asked, "Were you able to help him fix it?" "Oh no, I stopped to help him cry."

The boy in our story is not responding out of some external ethical demand or cultural requirement for compassion. He is responding from the core of what it means to be a human with other humans. Being human is not just about being able to fix a broken bicycle, being human is about taking the time to cry with a friend.

However, we live in an affluent culture — a culture that gives us privacy from each other's pain. We are not as practiced in compassion as we are in averting our gaze, or feeling mere pity, or anxiously becoming quick fixers of problems or developing emotional distance as professional helpers. Metaphorically there are plenty of bicycles, plenty of bicycle repair shops, and not much time for weeping together.

Being part of a church community offers us the opportunity to remember what it means to be humans together in natural human community. I learned about compassion first hand when I was a member of the UU church in Canton. When we had been attending for just a few months a Spring ice storm took down the electric wires in my neighborhood. We had no heat. A family we knew from one circle supper invited my family to stay with them until we had power again.

¹ *MIRROR NEURONS AND THE BRAIN IN THE VAT* [1.10.06] by V.S. Ramachandran

Several years later, when I returned home after having major surgery, a woman showed up at my door — someone who was brand new to the church — bringing a casserole, home baked bread, beer, and brownies for dessert. The next day a church friend brought soup and Kahlua ice cream.

All of the people who stepped in to help my family stepped over the privacy boundary with a compassionate gesture that took time. The time they took connects us across eternal time.

Some years later when I was a minister with the First Parish in Waltham, we had the luxury of a Care Committee. The Care Committee made sure that anyone who was just home from the hospital, or had a birth or a death in the family was sent a meal and received cards. They gave rides and babysat and did small errands. In the Spring of 2000, a young family was hit with terrible news. Their older daughter, just five years old, was diagnosed with a brain stem tumor. She was given six months to live.

The Care Committee jumped into action, coordinating all the people in the city of Waltham and beyond who responded to the pain of the family by wanting to help. Food was delivered daily. The house was cleaned. The yard was maintained. The people provided child-care and shopping and home repair. Twenty men and women built a two-story playhouse.

For nearly eight months one woman, Charlotte, took the names of people who wanted to help, gave them an assignment, and then listened to their grief when they called to say they'd been to the child's home.

Near the end of this time another local UU church was offering a workshop on developing lay ministry. I invited Charlotte to come with me so we could learn what other congregations were doing to extend the caring ministry.

We participated in a listening circle and I learned that Charlotte had been absorbing much of the pain of heartache and helplessness of all of those helpers for those many months. In her role of Care Coordinator she had been trying to manage her own feelings of helplessness by helping. And most every person she spoke to shared their grief and helplessness. She was overwhelmed but didn't let me, the minister, know, because she did not want to add another burden to what she thought was my impossible job of ministering to the mother and father, and the grandparents.

I realized as I listened to Charlotte that we as a church needed to add a way of helping. We needed something beyond the wonderful casseroles and cards. We needed to minister to each other — we needed to care for the caregivers.

And so we began the work of developing a program of pastoral assistants — volunteers from the church community who commit to special training. Our intention was to extend

the listening side of ministry beyond the reach of this solo minister. We understood this work of pastoral listening as a spiritual practice.

The training of pastoral assistants began with a class in Listening. I used the curriculum developed by my colleague Rev. Jim Robinson with the UU church in Brewster. He offered this two-day course once a year to everyone in the congregation and discovered that learning to listen is a simple but not easy spiritual practice that deepens the spirituality of the whole congregation.

The very first exercise is the meditation we practiced during our time of prayer this morning. Each person begins by remembering or imagining what it is like to receive the gift of listening. Not the kind of listening that gives advice, or is impatient for closure, or distracted by the tug of a to-do list — but rather the kind of listening that welcomes whatever shows up.

We discovered together that simply being heard is precious and rare. Learning to be listeners in this way became the goal of our practice.

Quaker teacher, Parker Palmer, observes that we have many sorts of conversational spaces in our world: spaces where the intellect can show up and analyze; spaces where emotions come into play where we express anger or joy such as therapy; we have task forces where the will finds space; and lots of spaces for ego where we can polish our image and demand our rights. However, Palmer observes, we have few spaces where the soul is invited to emerge. He writes:

“When the soul speaks through the intellect, we learn to think with the mind descended into the heart. When it speaks through the emotions, our feelings are more likely to nurture relationships. When it speaks through the will, our willpower can be harnessed for the common good. When it speaks through the ego, we gain a sense of self that gives us the courage to speak truth to power. Every human faculty, as it becomes more soulful, can help us negotiate the complex terrain of life.”²

And we learned, much as Parker Palmer observes, that “community in our culture too often means a group of people who go crashing through the woods together, scaring the soul away.”³ Most often, Parker adds, when we are trying to listen to another’s suffering we “preach and teach, assert and argue, claim and proclaim, admonish and advise, and generally behave in ways that drive everything original and wild into hiding.”

Over time the folks in Waltham discovered that being a pastoral listener means having to be in relationship to our own sense of helplessness. Listening to the pain of another without jumping in to fix or advise requires that we listen to that condition in ourselves.

Ram Dass believes that “(t)he condition of helplessness is one that we tend to push away, deny, or stigmatize as a society and as individuals. Our cultural myths neither encourage

² A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward an Undivided Life, Parker J. Palmer, p. 57.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

us to accept a common helplessness nor teach us how to act upon it. When it is suddenly thrust upon us, we are unprepared. ... We cling to the notion of 'independence' — it's the name of our national holiday — as if it were an essential condition of all well being." (135)

And so to sit and listen to someone going through the shock of discovering the loss of power that comes with losing a job, a relationship, or one's health, is to discover the cultural conditioning that blames and shames us for being dependent or needy.

The way in which a listener addresses their own suffering, their own helplessness will shape the way they listen to the suffering and helplessness of another. If the listener is unable to tolerate the pain, the listener will become a distracting talker. If the listener is unable to tolerate helplessness, the listener will be full of advice.

The pastoral assistants in their learning to do the work of ministry faced this moment again and again. We learned a definition of ministry taught to us by Catholic theologian, Henri Nouwen: "A minister is not a doctor whose primary task is to take away pain. Rather the minister deepens the pain to a level where it can be shared.... When we become aware that we do not have to escape our pains, but that we can mobilize them into a common search for life, those very pains are transformed from expressions of despair into signs of hope. Through this common search, hospitality becomes community. Hospitality becomes community as it creates a unity based on the shared confession of our basic brokenness..."⁴

The chemotherapy nurse in the reading we heard this morning is an example of a person who has engaged with his own helplessness and his own pain thoroughly enough to be present to the pain of the children in his care. Despite the fact that he is the main pain giver he is also the most fearless and loving presence in the lives of the children in his care.

The Caring Committee here at the First Parish in Brookline has begun a program of Pastoral Assistants. Know that whenever you feel the need for a pastoral conversation you can call upon Rev. Jim or me or our intern Leslie Becknell Marx. We take seriously our call to serve this congregation as your pastors.

Know also that Ellie Boynton, Val Gunning, Jon Hazilla, Jane Hoey, and Susan Larabee are learning to be pastoral assistants with the called ministers. They are taking seriously the spiritual practice of listening. Like the child who didn't fix his friend's broken bicycle, they are ready to help with the crying.

Giving service in this community is their curriculum. In this work of giving service by listening they will meet their own limitations.

They will worry about stepping out of an old self image into a new one;

⁴ The Wounded Healer

They will be frightened by the intensity of their feelings;

They will discover the restlessness of their own minds as they try to listen.

And with the support of the ministers and each other they will also discover their own strength and courage,

They will drop their masks and meet us heart-to-heart;

We will know them by their nourishing presence.

They will be helping, not simply by doing, but rather, with their being.

May this community bless their willingness to serve with our singing: We'll Build a Land, #121.