

## **So Many Joys & Sorrows**

Sermon, Sunday, December 12, 2010  
Unitarian Universalist Church, Concord, NH  
Rev. Michael Leuchtenberger

Sometimes tragedy strikes when we least expect it. This story is told by Michael Dwinell in his book *Fire Bearer*:

“It was her fourth birthday party. She and her friends had just bought ice cream from the traveling ice cream man, but as she walked out from behind the white ice cream truck, she walked right under the rear wheels of an oncoming fully-loaded coal truck. If someone hadn’t yelled, he wouldn’t have known to stop. There was nothing that could be done because there was very little left of her at all.

The children, the little girl’s mother, some other adults, and the truck driver – a large, overweight, middle-aged man in a coal-stained, sweaty T shirt – stood silently in a circle. There were one or two attempts at pious utterings: “God takes the little ones first because he loves them most;” “She’s better off now that she is with God.” The silence was piercing.

The little girl’s mother, a small woman, began to weep and scream and beat on her head and face with her fists. As she stood there and beat on herself, everyone else stood in frozen paralysis. We stood there for a long time.

Then without saying a word the truck driver opened his arms, turned his hands outward, and looked at the woman. She walked slowly toward him into his embrace. He wept. She wept. The freeze was broken. The silence, the paralysis, was broken. We all wept. We wept. We held hands. We hugged.

The little girl was dead. We were dead, and with the simple motion of lifting up his hands and arms, the truck driver had offered us a ritual that gave us life and transformed us.”

There are no certified experts when unbearable suffering strikes. There are only those willing to remain in the moment, with the suffering, acknowledging its power, yet willing to open their hearts, not afraid of the hurt that will accompany a compassionate response. There is no cure for suffering any more than there is a cure that could bring back to life the little girl. But there can be healing.

Healing offers no magical fix, healing holds no promise of instantly eliminating all suffering. Healing is not done to someone, or follows a prescribed path. Healing can happen when there is space for the suffering to be acknowledged. Healing can happen when there is space for the suffering to be heard. Healing can happen when we make room for compassion.

The truck driver somehow sensed that his simple gesture, the opening of his arms, might create the space for everyone to begin the long journey of healing that will be required following this sudden death.

The truck driver was no expert trained in responding to this situation and yet he did the right thing. He was able to listen to the suffering, be present in the suffering and thus open his arms which opened the door to healing.

No one will be able to change the loss the mother has experienced. She will carry that loss with her for the rest of her life. But the experience of her loss can be transformed over time to the extent that she receives the gift of healing, to the extent that she is able to find ways to come to terms with her loss and her suffering. Healing means regaining your inner peace or at least moving in the direction of peace within yourself.

The death of a loved one profoundly disturbs our inner peace, but the need for healing is not reserved for such extreme experiences. The need for healing can be just as present in the mundane situations of our everyday life.

Rachel Fister found a blister  
On her little left-hand toe.

Just a tiny littler blister  
But she thought her mom should know.

We've already heard the rest of the story. We've already heard about all the attempts to cure and fix little Rachel Fister's blister. Until

Rachel's mother said, "Don't bother,  
for I think that I can guess."

And she *kissed* her daughter's blister.  
"Is that better, daughter?" "YES!"

A kids story, a silly story, yet a story we take seriously because many of us know Rachel well, because many of us have felt like Rachel, or feel like her right now. Feeling the sting of a blister, feeling burnt, or simply knowing there will be blisters, scrapes, and sometimes worse along the way, is one of the important reasons we seek out religious community. It is one of the reasons many have come to this church.

Healing is an important part of our ministry. Healing is at the core of our pastoral ministry. And as all ministries in this church, pastoral ministry is a shared ministry. We all play a role in this ministry, just as we all play a role in the other ministries of this church: the religious education

of our children, the faith development of all ages, the ministry of working for justice in the world, and the ministry of learning to live non-violently and sustainably.

One way to think of our ministries is to consider them spiritual practices. Each type of ministry is a kind of spiritual practice that allows us to become more fully human and to connect us with a mission and purpose greater than our selves.

Our communal worship services, thus, could be considered a training ground for each of these spiritual practices. My goal in creating worship is to have each of the worship elements point toward different spiritual practices in which we might engage throughout the week.

Again, I hope to have each worship element point toward different spiritual practices in which we might engage throughout the week.

What we do here in worship is just a beginning, a reminder, a symbolic sampling of the overall ministry of this church. Thus, worship becomes less about being served exactly what “I most want” all of the time, and more about discernment for each of us about our various ministries and how we can live out our ministries during the rest of the week.

Pastoral ministry is one of our essential ministries. There are many pastoral needs within our congregation. Some depend on the gentleness of a mother’s kiss, some depend on the open arms of a stranger or a friend, some depend on staying in the room even if you have no idea how to respond.

All depend on our willingness to make the encounter not about us but about the other person. All depend on our ability to listen and to offer a safe space when others are vulnerable. All depend on finding kindness in our hearts, letting go of judgment and expectations, and making room for compassion.

The sharing of Joys and Sorrows during our worship service points to our pastoral ministry. It is a reminder for all of us of the many joys and the many sorrows we each carry in our hearts at any one time.

Most of them remain unspoken, either too small or too big to share in public. Most of them remain unspoken, because we are introverts or because we have already shared about them in the past. Most of them remain unspoken because our sorrow – or joy – may involve another person in this church.

You may want to say: “I am afraid and sad because my marriage seems to be falling apart,” yet you cannot say that when your spouse is sitting right there in the second pew.

Or you may be struggling with a mental illness, perhaps something complicated and insidious, like bi-polar disorder or dissociative identity disorder. Some people are courageous enough to go public with things like that, but many aren't, for good reason. What if you are trying to get a job and need people to think you are basically together? It's a small town.

Or you may carry a secret about yourself – perhaps a great wrong you've done or are continuing to do. What if it involves another person? What if you want to publicly “confess,” so people know what you're really like, but you can't because of the harm a revelation would cause to a number of others?

These are not hypothetical examples. Indeed, most of our joys and sorrows remain unspoken. Those who are shared are symbolic of the pastoral needs of the whole. Those speaking represent all who have not spoken.

The sharing of, and listening to, Joys and Sorrows during worship reminds us of the importance we attribute to helping each other heal. It reflects what we mean when we say each week that “Love (in the form of compassion) is the spirit of this church,” and that we covenant, that we promise, to help one another.

It is a reminder that we all need to practice our pastoral skills. They are essential to who we are as spiritually healthy beings. And it is a reminder that we have many resources available.

We offer pastoral ministry through the visits of our Caring Network. The Caring Network has organized a wonderful group of people willing to go visit anyone who would like some company, a listening ear, and an open heart.

We offer pastoral ministry through the many small groups that meet regularly, our covenant groups, with their time for check-ins and a format that allows for trust and intimacy to develop.

We offer pastoral ministry through one-on-one meetings with the minister, the pastor - that would be me. My door is always open, hair-dresser style: that is, walk-ins are welcome, though an appointment is recommended.

And then there are those unexpected moments in the hallway, after a committee meeting, or in the grocery store parking lot between people who care for each other.

Let me be sure to say that just because the sharing of Joys and Sorrows is in many ways symbolic doesn't mean that it isn't functional for those who do share. Many of you have told me stories of the pastoral care you experienced thanks to your public sharing. We have to keep that in mind at all times. When somebody is sharing they deserve our attention and our compassion.

Rolling our eyes or mumbling under our breath while someone, anyone is speaking undermines the symbolic as well as the functional role of this worship element. It makes it unsafe for people to share, it could hurt rather than heal, and it is definitely not a good reason for a joy or a sorrow to remain unspoken.

Yet those who come forward as representatives of our joys and sorrows also have a responsibility. They have a responsibility to check whether what they are about to share does indeed point toward the pastoral ministry of our church. The lines are not always clear, but here are a few guidelines:

- If you are wondering whether the gist of what you are about to say could also have been shared as an announcement, stop yourself. Write it up for the announcements in the next week's Order of Service.
- If you are about to convince others of your opinion on an issue, stop yourself. Organize an event. Write an article. Engage in a discussion during social hour.
- If what you are about to say was better said in a sermon. Stop yourself and talk to me after the service. We'll find a way to get you preaching.
- Finally, ask yourself how you would condense the essence of your contribution into a single sentence. And then try and share that.

Over the past few weeks many of you have talk with me or emailed me about Joys and Sorrows. As a result, we have many creative suggestions on how to expand the functional aspect of this tradition, to allow more sharing by more people, all while we streamline the symbolic aspect, the open mic sharing of joys and sorrows.

Here is a summary of what we will try going forward:

Starting next week, there will be two big dry eraser boards on the walls right outside the doors of the sanctuary. One will be titled "Circle of Life" and the other will say "Board of Gratitude."

Under "Circle of Life" any of us can add milestones in our lives we would like to share with everyone, such as a wedding anniversary, a birthday, or a graduation.

On the "Board of Gratitude," our BOG (as opposed to BLOG), there will be room to express thanks for whatever you feel grateful for, such as help you received, or events you attended.

You are also encouraged to submit the same information for printing in our Service Bulletin, our weekly electronic newsletter, and our monthly Parish Notes newsletter. Ideally, we will find a social news editor who could be the contact person for this type of information.

We will also have a "Book of Life." (Show the book.) It will be available all week and before worship. Please use our *Book of Life* for joys and sorrows you would like mentioned in prayer. Whoever is doing the pastoral prayer will look at the book and weave what he or she finds into the prayer.

Lastly, I would like to invite you to light a candle of joy or sorrow at any time before or during the worship service. Simply come forward whenever you are moved to light a candle. We hope that many people will participate even if they do not feel comfortable sharing any details of what is on their heart.

We will also streamline the actual Sharing of Joys and Sorrows by having all who want to speak line up right away over to your left. Please light your candle and then come over to the center where the worship leader will hold the microphone for you. You can speak while others are already lighting their candle.

As we try out these new ideas, may we remember: We all carry joys and sorrows in our hearts. Yet, we are not alone. We give and we receive, and from this we live.