

Sunday October 1, 2017
Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Kamloops, BC
Blessing of Animals (and Humans)
Healing as Active Hope
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In the past, I've spoken about how relationships with animal companions have measurable positive benefits on human health and well being. For many, a relationship with a beloved dog or cat friend is a strong, therapeutic bond that can sometimes be transformative, even redemptive or healing. Animals relate to us without judging, criticising, or manipulating... not always the case amongst humans.

Our spiritual theme this month is "Healing." I've wrestled with this word for a long time...what does it mean to heal, or to be healed? What does healing look like? Who has the power or ability to heal whom? I think the crux of healing has to do with compassion.

In scripture there are at least 37 examples of Jesus reportedly healing people..."the lepers, the blind, the lame." These stories certainly illustrate the disparity, inequality and unfairness that exists for particular people in the world....the blind, the lame, etc.

Though unfortunately they depict physically challenged and disenfranchised people in a way that has done nothing to change stereotypes and enduring notions about disability, worthiness, and who has, and receives social privilege and power.

And the connection made between divine power and the reward of healing in these stories is not easy to digest.

As Unitarians, we leave space for mystery, awe, and all that is beyond our rational intellectual comprehension. So for us, healing is not contingent on an external cosmic or divine force that favours some and not others. For religions liberals and humanists, we hold that reward comes through intentional human action, creating better conditions so that equality, fairness, and inclusion prevail.

Most Unitarian Universalists do not believe in supernaturalism, the belief in an omniscient and omnipotent kind of God...our faith aspires to create a just and loving world through human endeavour in the here and now...collaboration, activism, service, compassion, and so on. In this light, we are the agents responsible for healing.

I believe that “healing” has little to do with the physical body...and everything to do with meaning and the human capacity for active hope.

I want to talk about healing and “active hope” today.

I used to work as a hospital chaplain at University of Alberta Hospital in Edmonton.

I covered five units, one hundred beds, with patients who’d come in for a whole range of medical conditions...some were quickly diagnosed, treated, sometimes with surgery or drug intervention, then released to continue their recovery and carry on their lives.

Other patients had degenerative diseases or aggressive cancers with poor prognoses, and there were also many elderly people with complex end of life medical issues; on average, a dozen patients on my units died every week.

As a spiritual care provider, I sat with many of them, and their loved ones. I listened as they reflected on their lives, their fears, their relationships...if asked, I would pray, sometimes I sang, or held hands ... sometimes I just sat in silence.

What I learned from these people who were going through dire circumstances, is that “healing” is not about getting better, or even continuing to live...Healing is about coming into a place of spiritual comfort and active hope.

Active hope is about expressing gratitude for having lived; being able to laugh at the absurdities in life, death, and of the human body itself.

Active hope is the state in which we realize that life may be ending, but we all get to leave some kind legacyit may be a legacy of kindness, humour, wisdom, compassion, generosity, activism, service or something else. Kernels of our being transcend death. Active hope assures us that we will continue to be held by all the people we've ever touched, inspired, challenged, motivated, and loved.

Healing is not about curing anything or changing the inevitable outcomes of diseases of the body, mind, or spirit; healing is being able to live with integrity and to find meaning and pockets of joy despite having those diseases.

Healing is a relational act; not what someone does to another, but how people companion each other with compassion.

We see healing occur in interspecies relationships. I can't tell you how many patients I met who deeply grieved the absence of their dog or cat as they were dying, as much or more than their human relatives.

Years ago when I lived in Montreal, I had a neighbour, a friend named, Janette. Formidable in size and stature, with a deep, resonant voice, piercing eyes, and oozing charisma, Janette held court in her apartment. Her place attracted artists, intellectuals, radicals, and other interesting characters. Janette's parties were legendary "happenings." Like all her "groupie" friends, we clung on her every word, as though she were a great and wise savant.

I really only fit in peripherally with this crowd; my relationship with Janette was complicated; she was unpredictable, sometimes kind and patient, other times demanding, manipulative, and needy. She'd borrow money from me when I could barely pay my own rent, and constantly wheedled requests of me to run her errands even though I was busy with university and a part time job. Despite feeling resentful, something about Janette made me compliant.

An enigmatic person with no family that I knew of, Janette was prone to hypochondria; she seemed to complain and feign illness to get her own way. So, when I came home one day to find an ambulance carting Janette off to the hospital, I thought this was more typical Janette melodrama. She had cried "wolf" one time to many.

A couple days later, I went to visit her at the...L'Hotel Dieu Hospital and was shocked to learn she had an aggressive cancer with very little time to live. She was alone and afraid; all the "cool people" from her parties had vanished.

Janette begged to see Mr. Kitty, her big black cat companion of many years.

Not one to deny a dying woman's last wish, I went home, let myself into Janette's apartment, and loaded up Mr. Kitty in a shopping bag, cleverly hidden in an old cardigan sweater.

I got on the bus for the 15 minute ride back to the hospital. Mr. Kitty was not a good traveler. I sensed the bus driver was getting suspicious of the noise...I covered up his howling by faking a loud coughing fit. I had to wrestle to keep him in the bag, cleverly feigning Tourette like spasms as a diversion for the driver who by now was glaring at our spectacle.

I climbed up to the 8th floor of the hospital using the stairs to avoid detection, and fell into Janette's room, gasping for breath. Mr. Kitty sprang from the shredded bag, a flurry of black cat and unravelled wool from my sweater.

The whole thing was mad, but seemed worth the effort when Janette mumbled dreamily, "*Oh, My Kitty, you've come home*" - the cat settled, lying on top of her for what were the last couple hours of Janette's life. There was healing that night; Janette finally showed her authentic and vulnerable self to me; she let go of fear and died at peace; I let go of my resentment of how she treated me; Mr. Kitty got to say goodbye to his human.

Have you ever seen the 1970's musical *Jesus Christ Superstar*? There's a scene where Jesus is surrounded by the cries of the needy: "*See my eyes I can hardly see, see my purse, I'm a poor, poor man. I believe you can make me well.*" The voices crescendo as Jesus is engulfed by the struggles of the people who cry out for his ministry. In a moment of helplessness and even rage, Jesus cries out, "*There's too many of you; there's too little of me. Heal yourselves!*" and he retreats to be ministered to by his followers.

While the scene may not be historically or biblically accurate, it captures a dynamic that Jesus must have known throughout his ministry. It captures a feeling all of us have known when we're called to give our heart and soul to a ministry or some work of greater purpose.

There are times when the breadth of needs in the world inspires us to a greater faith that fuels our human capacity to repair the brokenness around us, and energizes us to work even harder to realize the goal of Beloved Community.

Yet there are other times when it seems we have nothing else to give, and, like Jesus in the musical, we want to cry out, "Heal yourselves" and withdraw to take care of our own needs.

These are moments of compassion fatigue. Can you relate?

There are times it feels as though the needs of the people around me are much greater than any capacity I have to help them.

When congregations become weary, unable to self-motivate and activate and renew themselves... it's the minister who sometimes ends up with a broken heart.

Having an overview of an entire church community and its people, a minister sees the collective beauty and love and goodness. An amazing gift. We also see the broken places, the hurt, the lack of energy, lack of focus and vision, lack of critical numbers to effectively sustain the work of shared ministry – gaps in practical things--not having volunteers for set up, no lay led programs, or activism in social justice and service work in the larger community... we ministers witness our congregations' desire to *have* a community, and the accompanying paralysis that inhibits communities from flourishing.

Friends, I want so much for this Fellowship community to survive and thrive...but until you can honestly show me that you want it too, we may find we are climbing Jacob's ladder without ever reaching the desired golden plateau.

What would healing look like in your life? What would healing look like in this fellowship? Might it include reconciling old conflicts that linger and haunt?

My colleague, Rev. Don Wheat says, *“When you don’t give people the chance to say “I hurt”, they end up saying “I hate”....*

I would say, -- if hurt people don’t end up hating, they at least end up holding a mixed bag of shame, regret, and confusion that becomes manifest as mistrust, avoidance, and lethargy.

Healing work is not necessarily pleasant, but it is necessary. We can’t change the backdrop story of our lives or the history behind a community...and we may never be “cured” from whatever ails us, but we can get real and honest about it.

To be a community of healing requires dedication and a willingness to dig in, to listen to each others’ pain, to ask forgiveness when we we’ve had a role in creating the hurtful situation. We must listen and accept when someone says, *I was hurt by what you said, or what you did, or did not say or do.*

To deny another’s pain is to fall out of covenant.

An instinctive response is to blame. But blame is a futile, reactive tactic that diverts the reality of people’s pain with clouded talk of coulda, woulda, shoulda.

We can’t wave a magic wand to miraculously erases past mistakes. We can’t go back to the times before the diagnosis, before the accident, or before the falling out or whatever has caused things to shift.

We can show compassion to ourselves, and live an active hope. We can draw on the wisdom of experience, rather than dwell in regret, or wishful thinking.

We can make healing a partner that makes room for rest and times of celebration, and not simply a product of work, vigilance and relentless activity.

In closing, let us return to the words of Fred Recklau that Judy read earlier:

Healing may occur without cure.

Healing offers what might be.

Healing is a process.

Healing embraces reality.

Healing assumes grief.

Healing listens.

Theologian, Mathew Fox writes, "*Compassion is a spirituality and a way of living and walking through life.*" We have reduced compassion to an emotion that moves us to act in service, but it is better understood, I think, as "*an energy or radiation that pervades the whole cosmos.*" Compassion does not consist of acts of service we perform; it is a force or energy in which we live and breathe.

Friends, if broaden how we understand and experience compassion, then, maybe we will live with active hope, and be able to heal ourselves, and our communities.

Blessed be, and amen.