

Being a Companion in the Wilderness
Presented by Rev. Margie King Saphier on October 17, 2004
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When we visit a loved one with a life-threatening illness, we often are not sure how we should be? What should we say? The two most important things to remember is (1) "Be Yourself" and (2) Let your loved one take the lead. If you and your loved one have always had a joking relationship, and you are not sure if your jokes will be appreciated, the compassionate act is to ask, "Do you feel like hearing my crazy jokes today?" If the answer is yes, then go ahead with some. Twenty-eight years ago, I had a miscarriage that required hospitalization. It was around midnight when I was transferred from the recovery room to my hospital room. I was not tired, but I was hugely sad. So I put on the TV. There was Johnny Carson with a huge tarantula crawling up his arm. For the next hour Johnny Carson had me laughing - howling. At that moment, I could not have asked for a more perfect visitor. Laughter can be very healing. It was for me. But also be ready for the conversation to change from being light and funny to becoming serious, filled with sadness, only to return to humor. Joy and sorrow are truly intertwined, so be open to their flow.

Visiting the sick and dying is not only an important social obligation; more importantly this act of compassion is a religious act because it nourishes the soul - theirs and ours. By opening our hearts and minds to the person we are visiting, we discover that this simple act has an inherent power that expands our awareness of what is. As soon as we make the shift in our perception to include another, we begin to experience a larger reality - an experience for which words are inadequate. Compassion is universal in its very nature. It requires that we be with another in their suffering. We need to figuratively walk in their shoes. But as soon as we become convinced that our solution, our belief, our way is better than the person's we are with, we are no longer with them. Our view of

the world is no longer large enough to hold both of us. It becomes as narrow as our ego. Therefore we are no longer a compassionate presence.

The major world religions recognize that the litmus test of any religious idea, doctrinal statement, spiritual experience, or devotional practice must lead directly to acts of compassion. Karen Armstrong suggests, "Like art, theology is an attempt to express the inexpressible. And like great art, the best theology tends to be universalistic."

In order to express the theology of compassion, religions have created stories and teachings that lift up the spirit of compassion to make the teaching come alive viscerally and in one's heart. In the Jewish tradition, those who practice their faith are challenged to perform the *mitzvah* of *chesed*, or acts of loving-kindness. One of the most important mitzvahs a Jew can do is visit the sick. In visiting the sick, one is offering the healing gift of relationship.

Illness often is an experience of estrangement. Estrangement is at the root of suffering. When we become ill, we can be isolated from community. Initially this isolation may be a welcome relief, but if it becomes extended, we feel we are losing our place in community – at work, at church or synagogue, at clubs. An illness also estranges one from family, even when family is present. Because of the illness, one can do less and their role is compromised. And last but not least, in a prolonged illness one begins to feel estranged from oneself. This tri-pronged estrangement is the cause of suffering in the form of despair, sadness and fear. Illness and loss force the ill into an exile in a most profound way resulting in the existential question – "Who am I?" The African proverb expresses the foundation of this estrangement in the statement, "I am, because we are." Well, if we are no longer in relationship, then, "Who am I? I feel like a stranger, even to myself."

In Judaism the Torah provides a paradigm that is at the core of Jewish national and religious identity: it is the paradigm of the stranger. In Deuteronomy 10:19, the core commandment states, "And you shall love the stranger, for you too were strangers in the land of Egypt" The imperative to love and care for strangers appears 45 more times than any other commandment in the Hebrew Bible.

So how does one love a stranger? The Talmud teaches by becoming a "ben gil." A ben gil is some one who aligns him or herself at the most profound level with the one who is ill so that he identifies with the other. The point of identity is the ben gil's own sense of estrangement. To love the stranger is to experience one's own estrangement. Experiencing one's own estrangement enables one to relieve the suffering of the other through the gift of healing relationship. But the Talmud teaches that "a ben gil can take away only one-sixtieth of another's suffering." This lesson is important because it reminds that "I am responsible to be with you, but I am not responsible for you."

The proliferation of support groups in contemporary society reflects the wisdom of the tradition of the *ben gil*. Support groups are composed of people with similar life concerns, from substance abuse to child loss. Support groups are not, by definition, designed to offer solutions, instead they create a context in which the estranged can feel a sense of belonging. For many sufferers, they offer the sense of solace.

This morning's Buddhist story of the woman who visits people far and wide looking for someone who has not experienced the death of loved one illustrates the transformation that can occur when we open our hearts and minds to the suffering of other's. In this Buddhist story, the woman becomes a ben gil. Through the experience of her own loss she comes to feel a compassionate

connection to others who have also lost a loved one to death. If we open our hearts and minds to our own suffering and grieving, we find we are not isolated from others. Instead we are in connection with others because of our shared experience. This is very similar to the Christian tradition, in which the image of a wounded Messiah speaks to the image of our common woundedness. In his classic work, The Wounded Healer, Henri Nouwen called upon those providing pastoral care to identify with the sick and suffering by finding a corollary woundedness within themselves. This enabled one's personal pain to serve as a conduit to the primary woundedness of the other. Nouwen made it clear that this vulnerability on the part of the caregiver was key to the healing relationship. He went on to explain that it is not helpful to enter the world of the sufferer with an aura of competence and completeness. When we do this, our behavior results in deepening the sick person's sense of isolation. Instead when we visit, we need to be in touch with our own brokenness and incompleteness to form a healing relationship.

In the Unitarian Universalist tradition, we believe in the wisdom of all religions. So the metaphors of being a stranger or a wounded healer can be useful to each one of us if we find they serve as a conduit to understanding. As a Hospice chaplain I find I often draw on the key tradition of Unitarian Universalism: the quest for truth and the teaching of compassion. Every Sunday we covenant to unite our hearts and open our minds to a greater reality as we accept, support, and encourage one another. The covenant authored by L. Griswold Williams (471) is used in many UU Congregations. It states that, "Love is the doctrine of this church; the quest for truth is our sacrament and service is our prayer."

When we open our hearts and our minds to a larger reality, we need to let go of our perceptions and illusions so that the quest for truth can truly begin. The quest for truth calls us to be aware of the continual unfolding of what is. It is

interesting that the Hebrew name for God is Yahweh, which is derived from the verb to be and is translated as meaning, “I am who I am” or “I will be who I will be.” This translation conveys the constant and continual unfolding nature of existence, of the earth and the universe, the Ground of Being.

Our Unitarian Universalist history and covenant embraces the fertile creative power of a larger reality – “I am who I am” - knowing that no one religion can contain it. Therefore I suggest that most Unitarian Universalists feel more comfortable living in the continual quest for truth, knowing it is always evolving rather than claiming one truth. In the preface of the hymnbook “Singing the Living Tradition,” it states “Religion is a present reality; it is also an inheritance.” The present is each moment as it unfolds. Our inheritance is our history, full of stories of seekers like Francis David, the father of Unitarianism. Not only did he believe in one God, as opposed to the Trinity, but more importantly he believed in the constant and continual search for truth.

Most of us do not live our daily lives thinking about the constant and continual unfolding of each moment. Instead we experience life based on our individual perceptions. When we are sick we are often forced to let go of our perceptions – suddenly we can no longer work, drive a car, or get from one place to another on our own. This experience can leave one feeling like a stranger or feeling like one who is wounded. It also can feel like being in the wilderness – facing the vastness of unknowing, no longer knowing the truth as we had perceived it – it is a spiritual time questioning the nature of our very existence. When we are in the wilderness, we are in a *Kairos* moment, meaning a moment that simultaneously holds opposing possibilities. Being in a spiritual wilderness we can feel there is no larger reality outside of the constant smothering thoughts that negate any sense of our vitality and wholeness. At other times being stripped of all our illusions we become aware of the vitality and wholeness that is within

each one of us. What sustains us in this spiritual wilderness of extremes is faith in freedom to discover the richness of our own nature. Equally as important is the teaching of love in which freedom must reside. Freedom, that is **not rooted** in love, becomes chaos; whereas freedom, that is rooted in love, nourishes the well-being and happiness of the other, as well as ourselves.

So if we are visiting a friend or loved one, let us remember that we need to support through love and acceptance the freedom of the other to be. One way to do this is to remember this morning's children's story. Through the experience of her loneliness – of being in the spiritual wilderness – with no friends, Maggie knows what she needs to be healed:

“Right now the medicine I need is your friendship.”

“The prayer I need most is for you to simply be with me.”

“And the magic I need most is your love.”

May it be so.