

Beyond Care

Ordination Sermon for Marie Tulin

April 11, 2010
Rev. Martha Niebanck
Follen Church

I bring greetings from your UU brothers and sisters of the First Parish in Brookline, and as a saint of our community said every Sunday before she lit a candle of joy or sorrow, “Hello church!”

Some people used to groan inwardly when Paula got up to light a candle of joy or concern every week—anyone concerned with the good order and propriety of the worship hour (including me) squirmed as she offered a litany of gratitude and prayer requests.

Over time I learned that whenever I heard Paula’s effusive, “Hello church!” I had a choice to clench or to relax, a choice to worry about losing control of the service or to surrender into the moment. I learned I had a choice to teach her how to do the candles “right,” or to practice floating on the mysterious presence of spirit that is beyond my care and control.

And now that Paula has “gone home,” as she used to say about dying, our welcome on Sunday morning is “Hello church!” in appreciation of the playful space we have become.

And today, on this occasion when my UU sisters and brothers lift up one of their own as a spiritual leader, when this community gathers to ordain Marie Tulin, I know that we are participating in and surrendering to a mysterious presence that is beyond our care and control. I know that a minister’s role—leading worship, in a committee meeting, at the bedside, and even in the chance meeting at the market or the movies—is to call forth the memory of the power and the promise of surrendering into the play of mystery, the love that will not let us drown.

A minister’s role is to say “Hello church!” to each and all, re-minding and re-mem-bering the energy of community forming power in which we abide. To be a minister is to embody Psalm 139—to assure us of the reality of a love at the heart of the universe, that we might say:

Where can I go from Your Spirit?
Or where can I flee from Your presence?
*If I take the wings of the morning,
And dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea,
Even there Your hand shall lead me,
And Your right hand shall hold me.
If I say, “Surely the darkness shall fall on me,”
Even the night shall be light about me;
Indeed, the darkness shall not hide from You,
But the night shines as the day;
The darkness and the light are both alike to You.*

Ministering is to be re-minding and re-memembering that we only exist in relationship—there is no place to go away from relationship.

Let me share an experience from my own learning in a chaplaincy program as an example of what I mean by embodying Psalm 139:

I came to seminary having worked as an occupational therapist in a variety of settings—home visits, schools, and hospitals. Unlike many seminarians in CPE, I was comfortable with the chaos in hospitals. Hospital personnel are expected to move through a world of birth and death, blood and vomit, disaster and miracle as if nothing unusual is happening.

“Beyond Caring,” the title of this sermon, comes from the title of a manual for nursing students. It describes the essential part of caring for the broken—embodying the energy, or at least pretending to embody the energy, that *all will be well*; that no matter the emergency, nothing will unnerve those who offer care. The consciousness and the presence that a caregiver brings to those who suffer transcends all of the technically skilled acts of medical care.

My CPE supervisor assigned me to outpatient and inpatient oncology. I earned the trust of the nurses, because I didn’t faint or flee in the presence of the life and death dramas of their everyday work lives.

They knew I could pretend that I was in control in the way they pretended to be in control. Within a few weeks of watching me do a great job of pretending to be a chaplain, they asked me to do the real thing. The nurses were willing to share that they were being undone watching the addict parents of a young man, who I’ll call Tim, neglect his care in a way that risked his survival. There was often no food in his house. They forgot to pick him up when he finished his chemo appointments. They didn’t notice when he was gravely ill from the side effects of his treatment.

When we met, I could tell that Tim was inexperienced at receiving nurturing attention and was embarrassed by my visits. I was inexperienced at offering spiritual nurturing, so we were embarrassed together in our attempts to connect.

One morning I stepped into the clinic as usual, ready to do my counter-clockwise rounds of the patients. Turning to greet the first patient to the right of the threshold, I was faced with a man in chains. Most of his head was shaved, except for a top-knot. His muscled arms were covered with tattoos, including a vivid portrait of Jesus with thorny crown and red, dripping blood. There were two guards, one shackled to the prisoner, another just outside the door. The nurses were especially quiet that day as the game of pretending that nothing unusual was happening was being challenged with a vengeance.

The prisoner's face was without expression as I immediately reversed direction, escaping left to a patient I already knew—a kindly looking, white-haired, former kindergarten teacher. She and I spoke softly, neither of us mentioning the spectacle of a man in chains exuding an energy simmering violence. I remember holding the whole room of patients in the circle of my vigilant attentions as she shared her experience of choosing to teach the children on the "poor side of

town." She told me that she'd never married and that she felt a call from God to provide stability for kids who came from chaotic homes.

My heart was beating in a panic behind the pretense, when I suddenly felt as if the kindly kindergarten teacher had transformed the clinic into a classroom for frightened children, a classroom that included me. The cold well of fear in my clenched heart was touched as I listened to her gentle voice. I appreciated that even as she was turning toward her own death, she was living her call to be a harbor for little boats tossed in waves and wind.

We finished our conversation with a prayer. I stood and, miracle of miracles, walked toward the powerfully strange man with my open hand outstretched, unscripted though true words coming out of my mouth, "Hi, I am the chaplain. I have been admiring your tattoos. They remind me of my son's. He's got dreads, and I think he'd love your hair." He offered his hand in return, softened his expression, and said something about the irony of a minister's kid looking like him. Then he added, as he gestured to the seat beside him, "Don't mind how I look. I have to look this way. Keep's the crazies away."

We had a long conversation about the Jesus of his tattoos that ended with a prayer for his healing—all the while pretending that being chained to a guard and a chair while being treated for cancer with poison was nothing unusual.

With relief on their faces, the nurses directed me to Tim, who was being treated in another room. Again, unplanned words jumped out of my mouth as I told him about the prisoner who was in the next room.

Tim, letting down his guard a bit, told me how both of his parents had been in prison while he was growing up. He smiled as he told me that he once thought that God had given him cancer as punishment for his own cocaine use, but had since decided that God gave him cancer so he could stop using drugs and make a life for himself.

Smiling and talking in the way of hospital culture, as if nothing unusual was happening, I sensed myself abiding in the flow of a vast sea connecting each to all.

I could not claim that my will or my competence had been at work. I believe that the community-forming power of love, the loving heart of creation, shouted, "Hello church!" to the whole of the outpatient oncology unit. We pretended that nothing unusual was happening. And perhaps we were right.

I believe that the community-forming power of love is present everywhere and anytime—even when we make our bed in the hell of believing we are in control or that anyone of us responsible for how things turn out.

I believe that the community-forming power of love that we will witness today as a special reality is actually ordinary reality whether we are awake to that energy of soul and spirit or not.

I offer a prayer by Rebecca Parker, the prayer that marks the completion of our candles of joy and concern.

May it re-mind and re-member that our church is love incarnate. May we know that incarnation as ordinary reality:

There is a love holding me.
There is a love holding you.
There is a love holding all.
We rest in that love.

Amen and blessed be.