

«Who Cares? – Thoughts on pastoral care in community»

Sermon by Rev. Patty Hanneman, March 22, 2009

The Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Hillsborough, NC

Sharing life's joys and life's burdens is part of what it means to live in community. We give birth, we have child dedications, we marry and celebrate anniversaries and birthdays. And for each of these celebrations, we invite in the members of our community. Many times, over the past few months, I have seen how this community celebrates together. Congregations – as their purest, best, most open-hearted selves – more than any other organization, can be a home where these celebrations can be shared.

And the burdens of life – loss of relationships, loss of a job, of our health or our independence – these are also things that can and should be shared as a community. We live in a world that can sometimes feel hostile, or at least indifferent, and living in this way can lead to a hunger for the kind of healing hospitality that is at the very core of faith traditions the world over. Because the world over, people find strength in the company of others. And yet it is not part of our American culture to *invite* people into the life experiences that burden us. To celebrate with us, yes, that's okay, but we don't want to burden anyone with our losses, we don't want to be a downer, even when we might gain strength from having someone around.

It is because of this wide difference between what we know to be true about ourselves, and what our culture tells us is appropriate, that gives us as a community of faith an *obligation* to have systems in place through which we can reach out and invite ourselves in, with care and support, when the need arises.

Three weeks ago after our brunch here together, I asked us to think about how we were doing at being an open-hearted community, at doing *in-reach* here at UUCH. Several of you stayed after the service to share your thoughts and the Committee on Ministry and I used that information to guide our discussion that first week in March, and I thank you for offering your thoughts to us. One of the topics we discussed was the need to provide a better framework to provide good pastoral care in this congregation, and what that might look like. I have witnessed so many acts of caring in this community since I arrived last fall; all kinds of care happens that is not part of any organized effort. And yet the Committee on Ministry and I agree that with the growth in membership we've witnessed recently and which will likely continue in the future, it is time we begin creating a system through which we can reach out with care and support to members who need it. And before you ask the question, the answer is no, we will not be forming a new committee. There are ways we could be more organized in our care-giving without more committee work. Trust me on this.

As faith communities go, Unitarian Universalists have never been on the cutting edge of designing systems for pastoral care. This is not because we don't care about people, but rather it's because of who we are historically, demographically, and even theologically. I grew up in a very

different sort of faith community, a conservative Lutheran Church in rural Minnesota, and comparing my experience there with UU churches I've been involved with is always interesting. St. Peter's was in the midst of a farming community, and much of the energy of those hardworking church members was used to care for one another. I remember being frustrated by this as a youth leader. It was at the height of the Vietnam War and there was not the least bit of interest in our church in world affairs or the peace movement that the liberal churches in the Twin Cities seemed to focus on. Instead, these people were hunkering down, paying attention to their own. Somehow this seemed self-serving to me.

In the years that followed, I've come to appreciate the gifts they bestowed on one another by learning good pastoral care skills. I've learned that a group's *ecclesiology*, which means, what it means to be a church, grows out of the needs of the community. In this Lutheran church, the majority of our members were high school graduates, many scrambling to survive, most without health insurance. Unemployment, alcoholism, and domestic abuse were common undercurrents disturbing that community. I have come to understand that the first task of church ministry is to help people feel safe and cared for. Only then can the work of growing together religiously, engaging in prophetic work, and social activism begin. That community, at that time, simply couldn't go there.

There is a myth among Unitarian Universalists, I think, that we do not have to worry about feeling safe and cared for. It is true that as a group UUs tend to be on the upper end of the scale for both education and income. This allows us to believe that we can be quite independent, and to value this independence and freedom over creating networks of mutual caregiving. Whatever suffering we may bear, most of us have been blessed with a good education, enough to eat, and opportunities to lead useful lives. As blessed and privileged people, we believe ourselves, therefore, and our fellow church members to be self-reliant. And if we can't rely on our own strengths for a time, we have the resources to hire someone to do it for us. For we are *not* a hardscrabble lot.

This has led to a de-emphasis on pastoral care in our congregations *and* (dare I say) in our seminaries. Yes, we are expected to spend a few weeks in hospital chaplaincy rotations and take a pastoral care course, but it becomes clear to us during seminary that the path to being a well-known Unitarian Universalist minister does not hinge on being a good pastor. As I read many biographies of famous Unitarian and Universalist ministers, I remember only two instances where pastoral care was mentioned. The first was in a biography of Theodore Parker, a 331-page text, that mentioned, almost as an afterthought, "He never forgot his pastoral duties." The second was in a biography of one of our best known ministers, Ralph Waldo Emerson. There is a story of Emerson sitting at the bedside of a dying parishioner. Evidently Emerson did not have such a great bedside manner, because at one point the parishioner turns to Emerson and says, "You know, you really should go into another line of work."

Emerson's story leads me to consider a deeper reason of why we as a faith community might de-emphasize pastoral care. For all his eloquence, Emerson evidently did not possess a language that could reach someone in pain. And I wonder sometimes whether as a denomination we shy away from this aspect of ministry because we're not sure we have a language, a theology,

that can address suffering. Providing pastoral care requires some spiritual risk-taking, something that we as Unitarian Universalists can be reluctant to do.

I was intrigued by a recent article in *UU World* by Christine Robinson called “Imagineers of the Soul” in which she talks about the spirituality of UUs as being either “wintery” – shades of grayish doubt or the absence of spirituality – or “summery” – where we celebrate the clear presence of spiritual ideals, such as the glories of the human spirit or the life-giving interdependent web. Pastoral care sometimes requires meeting another person in a more *uncertain* place, where the spiritual life may be fragile, even torn and shattered. And because as Unitarian Universalists we have been taught that our natural state is one of self-reliance, when our spirits become fragile, it can lead us to say, “What’s the matter with me?” How do we deal with this shift away from normalcy, with this question, as pastoral caregivers? What language do we use?

Often we can invoke the Holy by simply saying, “There is nothing wrong with you.” By letting another person know there is nothing wrong with being in that fragile place, that it just happens sometimes, to all of us, you can provide a much needed ministry. And the one thing you can promise is that they won’t have to be in that place alone. I don’t know if Emerson thought of saying that. I do know that often it’s the most theologically grounded, most open-hearted thing you can say to someone who’s hurting.

It is time for Unitarian Universalists to truly believe it’s *okay* to put systems in place to care about people, to remember that we are not totally self-reliant, and that we do have the spiritual resources to provide good care. The past few weeks I’ve been contacting other UU churches to see what kinds of networks they’ve created for pastoral care. Some ideas I’ve heard of include Neighborhood Circles that provide transportation and meals, trained visitors that see the hospitalized and homebound, babysitters to give new parents a break, and covenant groups that help members stay connected. This is not an exhaustive list, and I’m sure we could think of others. Neither should we try to do everything on this list; that would be overwhelming, and overwhelming people is not my intent. Part of community care is to not overwhelm members with all sorts of new volunteer opportunities! But if you believe as I do that a system can be created that helps share the load, provides training and accountability, and that this is an idea whose time has come, then I invite you join me in thinking about how we could begin to put something in place.

The question I leave you with is this: what kinds of promises do we want to make to one another? I would love to be able to say to each new member that joins this community, “You will be cared for here, but at some time you will be called upon to care for others, and we will be here to show you how. That’s our promise.”

That is my vision for this community. May it be so, and blessed be.