

Sometimes You Just Need a Good Exorcism

Thank you for having me here with you this morning! I have very recently moved back home to Austin from Pasadena, California, where I completed a nine-month ministerial joint internship at Throop and Neighborhood Unitarian Universalist churches and then also served as Summer Minister at Neighborhood Church. During the last meeting of my internship committee, we were going over my final evaluation when one of the members of my committee made a joke about how I had done a little bit of everything during this internship, weddings, memorials, etc. & that all that was missing was an exorcism. I laughed and answered, "No, that was *last* year!" There were some chuckles & we went on with our business at hand until about ten minutes later when one committee member, asked in delayed amazement, "Wait a minute, did you say that you did exorcisms last year? I have to hear about this!"

I spent the year before my internship hospital chaplain in a large hospital in San Francisco. I jokingly refer to them as exorcisms, but twice in that role I was asked to either assist in or perform a ceremony that would cleanse or clear a space of negativity that was believed to be impeding and also counteracting the healing process.

The first request came while I was on my first rotation- six months on one of the pediatric floors. The patient was a preschool-aged child with a life-threatening illness and had been in and out (mostly in) of the hospital since soon after birth. I had come to know her and her mother quite well. Both were monolingual Spanish-speakers and were Catholic. One morning, I walked into the patient's room for a routine visit to find her mother unusually upset. This child had bad days before and her mother was known to remain optimistic at best and calm in front of her child, if nothing else. I knew that something was different about this day. She told me that the nurses were about to transfer them to another room on the floor and she did not want this to happen.

After going back and forth between the nurse's station and the patient's mother a few times in an attempt to resolve the conflict, I learned that the mother feared being in *that* particular room that they were to be transferred to, since the last time her daughter was in that room she dropped from the best she had been feeling in a long time, to a brush with death shortly after moving into the room, that only improved when she was moved out of the room again. The mother had spoken to another who told her of a similar experience she had with her child in the same room that her daughter had been transferred to. Together they formed the conclusion that there were "bad spirits" in that room; that maybe a child had died in there in the past.

After she realized that there was no other option and that her daughter would, indeed, be moving to the dreaded room, she told me that she would be comfortable with it only if a certain bilingual priest who had become a family friend could come and bless the room to get rid of the bad spirit. He was not in the hospital that day, so I called the on-call priest and jokingly said, "Hey Father, I've got an exorcism for you!" "Oh, wonderful!" he said. Later that day, the three of us met in the feared room and he sprinkled holy water and prayed while I did my best to translate in my broken Spanish. She was satisfied and her daughter stayed in that room several times over the next few months of my rotation.

The second request came during my six-month rotation on the floor that housed labor and delivery and the neonatal ICU units. I was paged to come up and provide support to a family whose baby was being removed from life sustaining care. He was a couple of months old and had already had too many ups and downs. I was expecting the page, as the extubation had been planned for a few days, but these deaths were always tough. In her grief the following day, the baby's primary nurse made a comment to me about how, "that bed space is just no good. He was doing fine until he was moved there. We've lost too many babies there." A nearby nurse overheard and agreed. "There is bad energy there," she said.

A spiritual need was being presented, so I asked them if they would like my help in leading them in some sort of ritual to bring peace to the ICU bay. I had no idea what I was offering them, but seeing how excited they became at my suggestion, I knew that I had better figure it out. Later on, during my break, a couple of other nurses came up to me and half-jokingly asked if it was true that we were going to do an "exorcism" in that "bad bed space", but through their nervous laughter and sarcasm, there was a sense of necessity. I answered "yes," but that I was calling it a "cleansing ceremony" and they said simply, "Thank you. We really need it."

A time was arranged for the next day. About 6-8 nurses showed up. A group of doctors were doing rounds a couple of isolettes over. I walked around the room with an unlit bundle of sage, sprinkled water from a plastic vial marked "Holy Water" I had found in our supply room, and I said these words, "With this water we cleanse this space & make it whole. May any negative energy return from whence it came. May healing Love fill this space and dispel all despair. May all patients, their loved ones, and their caregivers move about this space in peace and harmony." We then prayed together that the space may be a place of healing for the babies, their families, and their caregivers.

During the 3-5 minute ceremony, some nurses began to cry. I asked them about it afterward and they said that they were just thinking about all of the babies that had died in that spot and were remembering them. One of the attending neonatologists approached me later and said that she was glad to see that we had done "something like that." In the weeks that followed, nurses reported that babies were now doing well in that bed space.

After hearing these two stories, my internship committee urged me to consider preaching on them. "There's a sermon in there," I was told. I knew they were right, but it was tough to find just *where* the sermon was. Like myself, I suspect that many of us in this room are agnostic about things like "negative energy" or "bad spirits"; we don't quite know what to make of it all. Others may fully believe that a space can contain negativity that requires removal, and still others may be firm in their disbelief. Yet, how many of us have our own little rituals or ways in which we exorcize our lives of stuff we are ready to be done with? Have you ever given the house a good top-to-bottom scrubbing after a bout of stress or disorder in your life or decided to replace the piece of furniture you and your ex bought together well before it was practical or economical to do so? Have you ever gotten a new haircut or moved to a new neighborhood, town, or state just because it was "time for a change?" Have you ever gone through a period of grief, or hit one of life's many potholes and come out on the other side wishing your life were like one of those Etch-a-Sketch drawing tablets that you could just shake hard and return to a blank screen?

There's something universal about that narrative. At some point or other, we all hope for and find ways of wiping our proverbial slates clean and beginning again. Sometimes this happens with physical objects or places. We are sensory creatures who ascribe memories of emotions as well as sensations to places and to things. If I asked you all to think right now about your favorite article of clothing- the one that is nearly threadbare from frequent use- and to tell me about it, no doubt there would be stories included with its description. We tend to cling to the things, people, and places that bring us happy memories and pleasant emotions and feel a sense of renewal when we leave behind the stuff that does not, regardless of whether or not we attribute it to negative energy or to spirits ill at rest.

Yet, despite discovering *this* universal truth in these "exorcism" stories, it did not seem as if beginning again, wiping the slate clean, or clearing the air was all these two anecdotes are about. Yes, there did exist a deep spiritual need for renewal in both cases, but also present was the need for compassion. In both instances, I was able to act as both an agent of compassion *and* a witness to it. The mother asked for someone to understand her fear of losing her daughter, to allow her space to express that, and to honor her request for prayer- to take her seriously. The good-humored priest and I were able to provide that for her.

When the nurses asked me to clear the NICU bed space of negativity, they were also asking to have a space to grieve together in a work environment that did not always allow time to do that. In weekly interdisciplinary rounds, sometimes we would come to a baby's name that had died and it would be said that, "Oh, unfortunately she's been transferred to the 16th floor... late last night." Everyone knew that the hospital only had 15 floors. It wasn't that they didn't care; it was that they did care; so much so that pausing to grieve with one another would take time away from the other patients when every minute counts. That day, the day of our little cleansing ritual, they compassionately gave themselves and each other permission to shed a few tears, for a few minutes, in the middle of a hectic 14-hour shift.

In both cases, compassion was being requested as an assistant in both physical and emotional healing. Just as we have basic physical needs of food, shelter, clothing, and so on, we have basic spiritual needs, among them to love and be loved, or, to care and be cared for. There have even been numerous studies conducted, including many that were largely federally funded, that have explored the correlation between prayer and improved healing. Some religious bodies even make claim that prayer alone, one means of demonstrating compassion, can bring about emotional or physical healing. As suspected, each study has been inconclusive. How can you measure the intangible? And, most would agree that healing is best achieved with compassion working in tandem with other interventions. But, without offering compassion to ourselves and receiving compassion from others, the healing process is always complicated and extended.

Think back with me once more, if you will, to those times when you've been able to exhale, wipe the slate clean, and start again. What happened in order to get you to that place? Who listened to your story along the way? What did you do for yourself that allowed the time necessary to pause for reflection? Who gave you pep talks that helped you to trust and to believe the pep talks you gave yourself?

My guess is that this *healing compassion* is one of the secrets of longevity. It is certainly a key to happiness and a sense of belonging. How many times have we heard others say, or have said ourselves, something like, “if it weren’t for so-and-so, or my friends, or the people at this church at such-and-such time in my life I don’t know how I would have ever...” We need others to give a damn and we need to give a damn about others. It’s a *necessity* in our wounded, broken lives and in our wounded, broken world. The Broken Buddha reminds us that, in all our wounded brokenness, we *all* have the ability to help heal each other and ourselves with compassion, exorcising any demons that happen to cross our paths.