

The Legacy of Caring
August 17, 2008

“Even after all this time, the sun never says to the earth, ‘you owe me.’ Look what happens with a love like that. It lights the whole sky.”

I remember the first time I heard that poem by Hafiz. In the mere experience of hearing it, it was as if that sky-illuminating love filled the whole room and, similarly, my whole heart. “Yes,” I thought, “A love like that. I’ve known a love like that. I want to keep knowing a love like that: A love that never says, ‘You owe me.’”

Of course, in the world of human relations, it’s easier said than done. We human beings, inevitably, even if most often unintentionally, hurt one another, miscommunicate with one another, develop resentments against one another, have low points as well as high points in our relationships with one

another. For many of us, our imperfect efforts at caring for each other *and* for ourselves have at times even led us to the point of despair, the kind of despair that Unitarian Universalist theologian Thandeka speaks of when she says, “Despair is my private pain born from what I have failed to say, failed to do, failed to overcome.”

The ironic blessing for many of us is that very despair is what leads us to first walk through the doors of a religious sanctuary like the one we share today. We don't know what we'll find there. We don't necessarily know that in coming into such community, our private pain may be made more public simply by our growing willingness to become known by others. But pass through the doors we do, connect with people we do, and healing we begin to experience. Day by day, deed by deed, vulnerability by vulnerability, we begin to know and care not only for each other, but for parts of *ourselves* that have been

waiting to be discovered, nourished, cherished, and sustained. Hour by hour, connection by connection, we begin to say to our hurting selves, as does Thandeka, “Be still my inner self, let me rise to you, let me reach down into your pain and soothe you.”

While it’s true that Thandeka turns inward for healing, saying, “I turn to you [my inner self] to renew my life,” it’s important to note that she also turns outward. “I turn to the world, the streets of the city... rage and pain in the faces that turn from me afraid of their own inner worlds.” It is as if, by discovering in others the same fearful pain she has experienced within herself, her solitary pain becomes an empathic one, and thus a healing one: “This common world [that] I love anew... courses through my veins,” she says. “From within this world my despair is transformed to hope.”

I wonder, could despair be transformed to hope without turning outward as well as inward, without seeing beyond our own suffering to the suffering of others? Could despair be transformed to hope without our striving to understand our very lives as the intersections between our private pain and the pain of others? George Odell says, "All our lives, we are in need, and others are in need of us." "We need one another when we are in despair, in temptation, and need to be recalled to our best selves again," Odell says. As a side note, it reminds me of something my late brother, a recovering heroin addict, once shared with me. He said, "Addicts don't go to their first narcotics anonymous meeting because they're having a good day." We need one another.

Now, of course, not all people who enter through *our* doors come in on their knees. As Odell says, "We need one another when we would accomplish some great purpose, and

cannot do it alone.” For instance, some people come in quite happily, having heard about our liberal religious education program, in which they wish to enroll their children. Some come because a friend has said, “Sure, I’d love to go out to brunch, but I need to go to church first,” and the first person says, “Church? You go to church?” and the friend says, “Yes, it’s a Unitarian Universalist Church,” and the first person says, “Unitarian Universalist.... I’ve heard about that. Mind if I tag along?” and so in through our doors they walk. In other words, despair is not a prerequisite for putting on your Sunday-go-meetin’ clothes, whatever they may be, and coming to church.

But caring for one another and ourselves is a necessity for living within and maintaining this religious community. Caring for one another and ourselves may in fact be the very thing that *makes* this a religious community. Remember what

Unitarian Universalist minister Mark Morrison-Reed says (and hopefully this *will* ring a bell, because I quote him a lot): “The central task of the religious community is to unveil the bonds that bind each to all. There is a connectedness,” he says, “a relationship discovered amid the particulars of our own lives and the lives of others.”

Now, Morrison-Reed goes *on* to say that “once felt,” this connection “inspires us to act for *justice*.” He does *not* say, at least explicitly, that such connection inspires us to *care* for one another. But would a religious community be a just community, if it were not a caring one? Would a religious community be truly religious if it were neither caring nor just?

To answer that question, though there are dozens, hundreds, thousands of religions in this world, I’ll keep it simple, and focus on just one religion, Unitarian Universalism. (That’s us.) Now, Unitarian Universalism does not have a creed

that I can refer to and deconstruct. Rather than being a religion set in stone, Unitarian Universalism is a religion set in process. As the Rev. David Bumbaugh said in a speech he presented here in Austin last spring, "...the earth and all who live upon the earth are products of the same process that swirled the galaxies into being, that ignited the stars and orbited the planets through the night sky... we are," he continues, "expressions of that universal process which has created and formed us..."

Furthermore he states that

...all that functions to divide us from each other and from the community of living things is to be resisted in the name of that larger vision of a world everywhere alive, everywhere seeking to incarnate a deep... process that called us into being, that sustains us in being, that transforms us as we cannot transform ourselves, that receives us back to itself when life has used us up. Not

knowing the end of that process, nonetheless we trust it, we rest in it, and we serve it.

We live, in other words, in a free and responsible and *collective* search for truth and meaning. We understand that search to be ever-unfolding, and we understand that living toward beloved and just community, that respecting the interdependent nature of life on earth, is of utmost importance. For, as Rev. Bumbaugh says (and as I quoted him just weeks ago),

...our location within the community of living things places upon us inescapable responsibilities. Life is more than our understanding of it, but the level of our comprehension demands that we act out of conscious concern for the broadest vision of community we can command and that we seek not our welfare alone, but the welfare of the whole.”

From our first guiding principle, which calls us to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person, to our seventh, which calls us to respect the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part, we are called to remember that “all our lives we are in need, and others are in need of us.”

So, believing that our religion is one set in process rather than in stone, and believing that that process demands, given our location within the community of living things, that we seek “the welfare of the whole,” I bow down to each and everyone of you for claiming last June, via an online survey, that caring is one of the five core values of this Unitarian Universalist community. I bow down to you not only for completing the survey which states this is so, but for living out this value of caring each and every day.

How do you do that? Just last week, about ten of you came together for a healing circle for one of our beloved members struggling with illness. Just yesterday, nearly thirty adults of you, as many children, and three dogs fed one another and companioned one another at the Wildflower family picnic at Dick Nichols Park. You live out caring when you come to my office, or ask me to come visit you, so you can work through something that's on your mind or in your heart. You live out caring when you say yes to delivering a meal to another Wildflower whom you might not even know that well. You live out caring when, during the greetings in our service, you find someone you don't know and introduce yourself, and then also turn to someone you know and love, and greet them as well. You live out caring when Gary Lich, the King of Care, calls you and asks you to send a card to someone, or sign up for a food train, and you say, yes, of course, absolutely. You

live out caring when you show up for one another in times of birth, in times of joy, in times of sorrow, in times of death.

I have witnessed all of that in the past year, and am humbled by a love like that, that lights the whole sky. Never once, in all that caring, have I heard anyone mutter or mumble, “you owe me.”

But one thing we do owe ourselves, especially as we continue to grow, is the question, how will our *means* of caring for one another need to grow as well? Right now, we are graced with a caring team ready to supply visits, cards, meals, and transportation when someone is ill or injured. Our fun and fellowship chairperson continues offering festive and creative ways for us to be with each other, and so to practice caring through times of joy as well. Currently, our website team is working tirelessly to create and launch a new, user-friendly website, which will enable leaders from all corners of

our church to update their particular pages on a regular basis, thus keeping members and friends of our church connected to the community and to each other through the Internet.

In the immediate future? All of us—*all* of us—can come to the Search for the Future workshop on September 6th (and I will be begging you to do so until that day), to create a new mission statement that will drive the caring community that we are. This December, if we vote to join Austin Interfaith, our ability to work for the welfare of the whole will be multiplied, as we join forces with other religious communities, public schools, and unions to care for our neighbors through political action. And who knows what other great opportunities will arise?

One thing I do know is that even in the easier said than done nature of human relations—even amidst the occasional stumblings, the miscommunications, the ups and the downs,

our religious community is one that, even after all this time, is not one ever to say, "You owe me." It is a religious community that strives to light the whole sky. It is one that strives to transform despair into hope, and it is one that will, eons from now, because of you, leave behind a legacy of caring. For that I thank you and say, amen.