

Giving of Ourselves
Sunday, September 25, 2022
Tri-County Unitarian Universalists
Summerfield, FL
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There is a reason why Jesus told parables and Aesop fables. I can stand here and give you facts, admonitions, advice. You are likely to remember very little of what I say. But, if I tell you a story, that you may remember.

So, two stories. Both are old and have been around for a while. Maybe you already know them. The first mentions an oxygen tent, which I am old enough to remember, but I don't think my daughter or grandsons are. The second is from before World War II.

"A nurse took the tired, anxious serviceman to the bedside.
'Your son is here,' she said to the old man. She had to repeat the words several times before the patient's eyes opened.

"Heavily sedated because of the pain of his heart attack, he dimly saw the young uniformed Marine standing outside the oxygen tent. He reached out his hand. The Marine wrapped his toughened fingers around the old man's limp ones, squeezing a message of love and encouragement.

"The nurse brought a chair so that the Marine could sit beside the bed. All through the night the young Marine sat there in the poorly lighted ward, holding the old man's hand and offering him words of love and strength. Occasionally, the nurse suggested that the Marine move away and rest awhile.

"He refused. Whenever the nurse came into the ward, the Marine was oblivious of her and of the night noises of the hospital – the clanking of the oxygen tank, the laughter of the night staff members exchanging greetings, the cries and moans of the other patients.

"Now and then she heard him say a few gentle words. The dying man said nothing, only held tightly to his son all through the night.

"Along towards dawn, the old man died. The Marine released the now lifeless hand he had been holding and went to tell the nurse. While she did what she had to do, he waited.

"Finally, she returned. She started to offer words of sympathy, but the Marine interrupted her.

"'Who was that man?' he asked.

"The nurse was startled, 'He was your father,' she answered.

"'No, he wasn't,' the Marine replied.

'I never saw him before in my life.'

"'Then why didn't you say something when I took you to him?'

"'I knew right away there had been a mistake, but I also knew he needed his son, and his son just wasn't here. When I realized that he was too sick to tell whether or not I was his son, knowing how much he needed me, I stayed.'"

Story number 2: “It happened in the years directly preceding the Second World War. A Quaker woman came to work as a nurse in a small Catholic village in Poland. There were no other nurses or doctors there, so the Quaker nurse did just about everything. She birthed the babies, tended the sick, set broken bones, cared for the dying. There was plenty to do. It was good work and had a rhythm to it. So the Quaker nurse stayed on.

“She stayed for a year, then a second year, and a fourth year, a tenth year and by then the villagers stopped counting. The Quaker nurse was practically one of them. The villagers loved her. The first babies she had delivered turned into fine young people. Their aging parents came to the nurse with their confidences and hot chicken pot pies.

“Then one day the Quaker nurse died.

“The villagers needed a place to say their goodbyes and bury the body so she could rest in peace. But the village was a small one, and it had only one cemetery- a Catholic cemetery. You couldn’t bury a Quaker nurse in a Catholic cemetery. It was illegal. There was nowhere for her to go... or so it seemed.

“The villagers got together. They asked one another what could be done? After much deliberation, they decided to bury the nurse just outside the cemetery’s stone wall. It was the best they could do. The young people dug the grave. The villagers said their goodbyes. They had loved her. Some cried. Then as the sun began to set, slowly they walked back to their homes and firesides. Darkness came. Sleep came. All was quiet.... Except for one sound—an odd sound—out by the cemetery. If you listened carefully, you could tell it was the sound of stone scraping against stone. And if you listened very carefully, there was another sound too—a sound that had a rhythm to it, the sound of labored breathing. The young people of the village were moving the stones of the cemetery wall. They worked in silence, breathing hard with the help of their parents.

“When the sun came up the next day, it turned out that the Catholic cemetery in the little Polish village was just a little bit larger than it had ever been before. As for how it got that way, when the villagers were asked, no one seemed to know. But the next night all of the villagers—even the Quaker nurse—rested in peace.”

Sometimes opportunities to give of ourselves come to us unexpectedly, seemingly out of nowhere. In the first story we don’t know why the Marine was in the hospital in the first place. Was he going to see a friend whom he decided didn’t need him as much as the old man? Was he stopping by to say hi to another nurse whom he was dating? Maybe he had finished what he had come to the hospital to do. Maybe he hadn’t. We don’t know. He gave up a night’s sleep or his own objective and a night’s sleep to sit with a dying man who needed his son.

I remember a New Testament seminary professor’s commentary on another story about someone who had an unexpected opportunity to help. Dr. Dey asked us why we called that story the story of the “Good” Samaritan. Maybe the Samaritan wasn’t the kind of person we usually consider “good” at all. Maybe he was member of a robber gang himself. Maybe he was cursing under his breath as he helped the man. Maybe he was drunk. Maybe he was worried about the event to which he would now be late. It was the priest and the Levite in that story whom society usually thinks of as good. But they were not the ones who helped when they saw someone in need.

We know nothing of the Quaker nurse in the second story. What prompted her to serve in a small Polish Catholic village? Was it a sense of calling? Was she running away from something? Whatever prompted her to first begin nursing in a small village in Poland the town obviously eventually became her home. When the villagers moved the cemetery walls in order to include her grave were they helping her or themselves or both? Their community had come to include the Quaker nurse. Even in death they did not wish her to be an outsider.

In our children's story in the Whistlestop the little girl, her mother and grandmother were helped by their neighbors and extended family when they had a house fire and the three generations of women all helped contribute to their funds for a new chair.

What do all these stories have to tell us? We are part of a spiritual community, Tri-County Unitarian Universalists, whose mission statement is "We unite in religious community to seek spiritual growth, live with integrity, and serve with compassion." What does it look like to "serve with compassion"?

In the blurb for this Sunday's service I said, "What do people looking for a spiritual home need most? Other people. People who can understand their troubles, celebrate with them and mourn with them. The best gift we can give to this congregation, to one another and to new people seeking a congregation is the gift of ourselves."

How we each do that will be unique to each one of us. My father was always the person to call if you needed help with some kind of home repair. Do not ask me to help fix a broken pipe. I am inept in that area and will be of absolutely no help and may cause a flood. If, however, you want someone to go with you to visit your great aunt at the nursing home call me. That I can do.

Some of us have an eye for beauty and can create a beautiful environment for us. Some of us have skills with finances and can make sure we can fund the programs we want. Some of us are good with people. Some of us are good with things. We need all types. As the Apostle Paul wrote to the Christian Church at Rome in the first century, "For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, ... we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us," Romans 12:4-6NIV.

Dana Worsnop put it well when she wrote, "Often people say that they love coming to a place with so many like-minded people.

I know just what they are getting at -- and I know that they aren't getting it quite right.

I don't want to be with a bunch of people who think just like me.

I want to be in a beloved community where I don't have to think like everyone else to be loved, to be eligible for salvation.

I want to be with people who value compassion, justice, love and truth, though they have different thoughts and opinions about all sorts of things.

I want to be with independent-minded people of good heart.

I want to be with people who have many names and no name at all for God.

I want to be with people who see in me goodness and dignity, who also see my failings and foibles, and who still love me.

I want to be with people who feel their inter-connection with all existence and let it guide their footfalls

upon the earth.

I want to be with people who see life as a paradox and don't always rush to resolve it.

I want to be with people who are willing to walk the tight rope that is life and who will hold my hand as I walk mine.

I want to be with people who let (this congregation) call them into a different way of being in the world.

I want to be with people who support, encourage and even challenge each other to higher and more ethical living.

I want to be with people who inspire one another to follow the call of the spirit.

I want to be with people who covenant to be honest, engaged and kind, who strive to keep their promises and hold me to the promises I make.

I want to be with people who give of themselves, who share their hearts and minds and gifts.

I want to be with people who know that human community is often warm and generous, sometimes challenging and almost always a grand adventure.

"In short, I want to be with people like you." May we give ourselves to one another and to those who are still to come among us. In that giving we will all be blessed.