



S U S T A I N I N G E A C H O T H E R
— A sermon by Rev. Jaco B. ten Hove — February 1, 2015 —
Cedars UU Church, Bainbridge Island, WA

Follows Hymn #95: *There is More Love Somewhere*
(...*More Hope...Peace...Joy...*)
and Responsive Reading #468: *We Need One Another*

We need one another when we mourn and would be comforted.

We need one another when we are in trouble and afraid.

We need one another when we are in despair, in temptation, and need to be recalled to our best selves again.

We need one another when we would accomplish some great purpose, and cannot do it alone.

We need one another in the hour of success, when we look for someone to share our triumphs.

We need one another in the hour of defeat, when with encouragement we might endure, and stand again.

We need one another when we come to die, and would have gentle hands prepare us for the journey.

All our lives we are in need, and others are in need of us.

Behold: “The silence of eternity (is) interpreted by love,” as noted by the influential Quaker poet and activist John Greenleaf Whittier. Not only is there “more love somewhere” but love is the lens through which we see our world, including “the silence of eternity.”

We need one other and would share love in ways that build and sustain community. This is perhaps easier said than done in our culture, which can be so isolating. So we try to find inspiration to renew ourselves and our love for each other, even amid the inevitable frustrations and setbacks that arise in living day to day, week to week—conditions that might well urge us into solitude to avoid disappointment and other pains.

I am heartened by the story one writer tells of how her mother had sadly died slowly from Alzheimer's but some time later she, the writer, was surprised by a vision that came to her while she was lying in wait on a massage table.

Suddenly my mother's face appeared—my mother, as she had been before Alzheimer's disease had stripped her of her mind, her humanity and 50 pounds. Her magnificent silver hair crowned her sweet face. She was so real and so close I felt I could reach out and touch her...She seemed to be waiting and did not speak...

I said, "Oh, Mother. I'm so sorry that you had to suffer with that horrible disease."

*She tipped her head slightly to one side, as though to acknowledge what I had said about her suffering. Then she smiled—a beautiful smile—and said very distinctly, "But all I remember is love" [Bobbie Probst, in *Chicken Soup for the Soul*, p. 6].*

Our very lives are vessels of love, carrying that eternal life-giving message into the future. This, I believe, is our abiding purpose as human beings: to embody and carry forth the gospel of love. And when the strength of our love wavers, when we feel fearful and/or depleted—as can happen to anyone at times—we have each other to hold onto for sustenance.

It is to that reality—the perhaps occasional but nonetheless steady need for mutual support—that I wish to address myself directly this morning. During times of both personally focused or widespread cultural stress, a painful paradox can emerge: some people are in need of relational sustenance, yet others can seem unable or unwilling to provide or share it.

For instance, economic struggles may force us into work modes that are very time-consuming, energy-draining and/or discouraging. Our tempers may be more on edge; our demeanors more fragile. Many kinds of guilt can erode our sense of self-confidence. Lingering anxieties might compromise our enjoyment of each moment and each other, constraining our normal inclination toward generosity. We may shrink into the daily essentials and nurture each other less.

So in the face of pressures like these, *it matters* how we respond and what we prioritize. *It matters* that we are strengthened by our relationships; that we *think* about sustaining each other, that we *deepen* our resources—individually and institutionally.

Our faith that “there *is* more love somewhere”—that “we need one another”—often brings us into community, into companionship, looking to find inspiration that will help us fulfill our own journey and maybe even help us be the source of sustenance for another who might be in need at any moment.

And usually we think that words are the tool with which to help. We use this curious and elaborate code of symbols called language to try to effectively express our feelings and ideas, and that's important, indeed. But expressing love and care is not always about finding the right words, a search that can sometimes allow verbiage to actually get in our way.

Love is expressed in many forms, only one of which is language. It can be offered without necessarily struggling to find the right words. We need not search for anything except who we already are, even without profound words. Sharing love can be that easy—just being who we already are—yet we still too often live life as if love were a scarce quantity, or one that requires vocal language.

Embodying an abundance of love is not something we are taught how to do very well in this culture. If we're lucky we may find some good mentors along the way, or we may have some good natural instincts that encourage a healthy balance of give and take in our relationships.

But I believe that *how* we enter into the vision of mutual, loving support makes all the difference, and this is a lifelong pursuit. We can always deepen our ability to be in relationship with others. Here's another true story from an experienced observer:

I have read about a nurse in a children's cancer ward, whose job is it to search for any available vein in an often emaciated young arm to give infusions of chemicals that are often long in duration and quite discomforting to the child. This fellow is probably the greatest pain-giver the children meet during their stay in the hospital. But because he has worked so much with his own pain, his heart is very open. He approaches his responsibilities in the hospital as a “laying on of hands with love and acceptance.”

*There is little in him that causes him to withdraw, that might reinforce the painfulness of the experience for the children. He is a warm, open space, which encourages them to trust whatever they feel. And it is he whom the children most often ask for at the time they are dying. Although he is the main pain-giver, he is also the main love-giver. [Story adapted from *How Can I Help?* by Ram Dass and Paul Gorman, pgs. 86-7.]*

It matters how we enter into the realm of mutual support. In this sometimes reasonably frightening new era, we can and should be very intentionally interested in sustaining each other, for our relationships are what we can always fall back on, *if* we have sustained them well.

I know I always benefit from reminders that show me the way. So, with gratitude to my teachers, I have assembled some perspective and approaches to share with you today, in hopes that they might help us all improve the odds for meaningful connectivity between people, especially when one might be struggling somehow and others endeavor to help—you, perhaps.

First, though, I have to acknowledge that Unitarian Universalists are generally a well-defended bunch, maybe especially those of us raised UU. We tend toward an internalized ethic of self-sufficiency, so we also tend *not* to ask for help when we might be in need. I fit this description thoroughly.

I *do* believe that self-reliance is a value, to a point. But when my inordinate drive in that direction becomes a barrier between me and others who could offer some needed sustenance, well, then I suspect this value evolves into a curse. Like last spring, as my younger sister Judy was dying after a long dance with lung cancer, I had a hard time acknowledging this loss.

But I appreciated those of you who ministered to me—simply, gently—perhaps knowing that my younger brother Jay also died of cancer just as we were moving here in 2008. And my mother Jean died of similar cause in 1977. Some of you know I am very attentive to my now-96-year-old father in Southern California, whom I visit and look after regularly. He and I are all that's left of our nuclear family.

Like many of us, I really don't know how to ask for help very well, or even what kind of help to ask for, but I'm trying to learn the difference between the value of my inner resourcefulness and the curse of trying to never appear vulnerable or weak. I may lift up and articulate well the principle of *interdependence*, but then live out of an exaggerated *independence*. To the extent that any of us are able to ask for help, we invite that life-giving spirit to join us on our path when the going gets rough.

Now, what I am about to suggest as ways we might be able to sustain each other does not pretend to approximate professional therapy, which is sometimes called for very clearly, but is not my training. I'll be talking about friendship and caring, when you might be able to “be there” for someone and help sustain them through a trying period. There *are* ways of “being there” that have been proven to be more or less helpful, and I will mention some of them, but it is also essential to recognize when you might be in over your head, and need to refer someone or yourself to professional counseling or other services.

Okay, it might go without saying that the most important part of being a friendly sustainer is the ability to be a good listener, but then again it never hurts to be reminded of this posture, since we so often move quickly toward what we think is helpful judgment and advice-giving. A noted presenter on issues of caring in community, Sharon Thornton, put it this way:

“Listening must be grounded in absolute and unequivocal respect.”

[Unpublished paper, “Ministry to Families; Educating for Pastoral Care,”
by Sharon G. Thornton, LREDA Fall Conference, 2000 or 2001]

Such respect also means limiting our own *translation* of what another is saying to us. Of course we translate all the time, but in good listening mode, we are aware of how our own filters can change the meaning of what we hear, and how, if we put our own spin on another’s comment, we can possibly diminish the speaker.

A common inclination is to think we’re being helpful when we can identify personally with another’s experience so we then offer a similar situation from our own lives. “I know what you mean. It happened to me when...” But this is not good listening and more often takes energy *away* from the person in need.

Instead of responding with that kind of perhaps distracting empathy, Thornton suggests “listening with imagination,” which involves both participants in a more mutual path. By listening with imagination, you can stay open to what you hear without needing to translate it into your own words or take it to your own conclusions or relate it immediately to your own experience. Listening with imagination helps me to remember to ask more questions and make fewer declarations.

The ancient Chinese scripture, the Tao Te Ching, addressed this with a simple statement:
“The sage helps the ten thousand things find their own nature.”

“Our own nature” is where and when we can be most authentic and true to our path. Outside of professional therapy, people generally need safe, affirming space to work on their own issues, and providing that space for another among “the ten thousand things” can be much more helpful than providing answers or solutions. And you never know when your mere presence is of value, perhaps more so than any great wordy wisdom you might impart.

This is a mysterious but liberating truth of companionship. Often just being there respectfully is what matters the most. “The silence of eternity interpreted by love” will carry the day. Here’s a pertinent story from the journal of a very conscious but humble teacher.

I happened to have been on a mountaintop in a state of great bliss when a stranger suddenly appeared next to me, sat down, and immediately started to describe this problem he was going through. By the time I'd pulled myself out of the Higher Realms, he'd already detailed the whole drama, the cast of characters, and the decisions he was facing. I hadn't gotten a bit of it. Nothing. Nobody. Moreover, it was much too late to ask him to run it all down once more. He would have felt very uncomfortable, justifiably.

So there I was, intimate confidante to a deep problem, without the slightest idea of who was who and who had done what to whom. My first reaction was to laugh hysterically. It was one of those great Human Condition moments. But this guy was obviously in distress and looking for a kindly pair of ears, so I picked up as best I could.

To my continued amazement, none of the details became any clearer as we walked down the mountain. I kept hoping I'd find out who "she" really was, and what "he" had actually done. No such luck. And I wasn't about to ask a question that would reveal my total ignorance, make him feel terrible—or lead me to hysterical laughter.

So we just quietly walked on down. And from time to time I would punctuate the conversation with what seemed like appropriate remarks: “That must have been hard.” “What did you feel then?” “Boy, things sure do get confused in life.”

Great insights like that. And he would nod appreciatively, continue, and I'd contain my sense of this wonderful human absurdity. Meanwhile, I was growing increasingly fond of this guy. And feeling great empathy for his problem—whatever it was. When we reached the bottom of the hill, he stopped for a moment and then suddenly embraced me.

“I just want you to know how incredibly helpful you've been. You're one of the most understanding, compassionate people I've ever met. Do you think we could have another conversation like this again?”

I was dumbfounded. It was one of the great moments in my life. “Sure,” I said. “I'd love to.” And he walked off to join some other people—a number of whom kept coming to me during the day saying, “What did you tell Eddie? He's just so grateful to you. He says you're wonderful.”

[How Can I Help? pg. 128-9]

Yes, good listening skills and/or just a loving presence *are* important in many settings, but let us now focus on a few particulars of how else we might be engaged in the act of “sustaining” each other, whether it be family member, friend, neighbor, etc. (We'll use the term “friend” to represent any companion.)

What else might help you sustain another?

- It helps to acknowledge the truth of your friend's feelings. Allow them to be expressed as fully as is natural, without trying to change them.
- It helps to stay in relationship even amid your own discomfort. Don't run away. Be present and interested and patient.
- It helps to be kind, to actively hold your friend in positive regard, to offer your generosity of spirit and time, unconditionally.
- It helps to offer reminders that despite whatever is troubling them, there can still be fulfillment in their life. Yes, it's a new emotional landscape, perhaps, but there's still value present. Invite them to name what they can remain faithfully attached to.
- It helps to look for small openings where hope might shine through and then remind your friend of their own worth. Even amid great misery there is always hope.
- It helps to note or ask about whatever new meaning is emerging in their reflections. Sometimes there might be surprises that are ultimately for the good, but they can be overshadowed by struggle and/or painful change. You can notice these newer elements and gently reflect them back, inviting awareness of new growth
- And it helps to listen with your own soul activated and alert, since there is often mutual benefit involved in such relational moments. You never know when there will be an important learning for you, or when your friend might become your teacher, even though you thought you were the caregiver.

In each of these postures, you begin by paying heed to your friend's issues, without projecting your own translations. But it's a good bet that there may also be some emerging material for you to think about, too—later, in your own settings.

So try this challenging technique: Whenever you feel called to suggest something to another person, hold that thought and first suggest the same thing *to yourself*, and see what happens. Notice when you feel compelled to do or suggest something, *but don't do it or say it right away*. In fact, be leery of it. Instead, test that same initiative on yourself before applying it to another.

This is a large challenge for me, but one that I've accepted, at least in theory. Whenever I feel compelled to do or suggest something for a friend in need, I will try to first look deeply inside myself to see if it is actually more about what *I* need.

This is a demanding approach, to be sure, and I sense its value, but I'll see if I can abide by the discipline. I am a veteran problem-solver and advice-giver, so it'll probably be very hard for me to fully add this step in my process. To the degree I can, however, I suspect it will change and deepen my ability to listen to others, grounded in absolute and unequivocal respect.

But for now, to bring me toward a conclusion, I want to return where I started. Do you remember the very first word I spoke in this sermon? It was: "Behold!" I love this word, because it always draws us to something that is worth noticing. "Behold," I said: "The silence of eternity (is) interpreted by love," as I honored the Whittier quote.

When you say or hear the word, "Behold" it usually begins a stirring new thought. *Behold*, I say unto you... *Behold* your own "interpretation by love"; it's A Beautiful Thing. *Behold*...each other, for you are all worth noticing. Behold, an abundance of love, to which you belong. Sharon Thornton helps me understand how important this is.

"When we behold others we do not just look and see what is in front of us. To behold also reveals our own need to be held. When we truly behold another we are moved, touched, and we become involved with them. This expresses a radical mutuality..., the beginning place of authentic relationship... At such a moment of recognition we practice hospitality in a way that offers us a glimpse of what our healed world might look like."

In such a time as we are in now, my friends, to behold "a glimpse of what our healed world might look like" is a spiritual act of great significance, and I invite you into that posture of radical hospitality and sustaining companionship.

Behold...each other, for you are all worth noticing. *Behold*...and be held. And "Come Sing a Song With Me"—Hymn #346...

CLOSING WORDS:

Behold: *All our lives we are in need, and others are in need of us*. So we would draw down and embody more love as we build community and relationships that matter by "listening with imagination." Let us bring to our friends a rose in the wintertime, as we share and dream and walk in rain "Here Together" (CHOIR Postlude)..... Go in peace, my friends. BE Peace. Return in **sustaining** love.

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