

“When One Door Closes... and It is the Only Door”

I can see my father over there, perhaps rolling his eyes at this non-scientific topic.... Perhaps not.... My mother, whose memory rests up in the Memorial Garden, would likely approve. I stand here to witness to you today in their presence and in their honor.

Thank you for being here today. Many of you already know about what I will say today. For those of you who know this, please allow me to remind you of what you already know. I bow to your wisdom and to your courage. Sometimes I find that this is the best truth: not a new truth, but a truth I already know but about which I need reminding.

51 years ago, in 1966, a former Marine took up a position in the central campus tower at the University of Texas at Austin, and shot 48 people. One of the first people he hit was 18-year-old Claire Wilson. She was in a central open area. She was severely wounded and unable to move. Rita Starpattern – a stranger with bright red hair - ran to Claire and offered her the only help she could: she lay down beside her and talked to her. For the next hour Rita lay next to Claire on the ground in the hot Texas midday sun and they talked. They were finally rescued and both moved to safety. Years later we can but marvel at Rita’s courage in offering Claire the only thing she could – her presence.

“When one door closes, another door opens.” You’ve likely heard this sentiment before. It is often offered to people who have a dream crushed. It is meant to offer hope and encouragement. But sometimes it is an untruth – an outright lie. Sometimes the door shuts – and there is only one door. Or it was the last door. There is in fact no way out and the person is stuck. Stuck with a situation or outcome that he or she surely does not want. What then? How do we respond individually and collectively when someone – maybe ourself - is stuck and there really is no exit.

We are creatures of action. As humans we meant to move forward. Consider the word “front” and its companion “back.” Very likely for any object that we can see or imagine, we can agree on what is the front and what is the back. We intuitively know what “front” is. That is because “front” is where the action is, or likely to be. Humans are hard-wired to move forward.... So when we are stuck, when we can’t move forward, we can become frustrated and unhappy. We can feel hopeless and helpless. And when we see others moving on in life, we can feel alone and abandoned

I speak to you from my years of being a pain psychologist. And from some years as a facilitator at the Cancer Support Community before that. These days I spend all day meeting and interacting with people who are stuck and unhappy. Chronic pain conditions such as low back pain, hip pain, neck pain, foot pain, hand pain, arthritis pain, organ pain, pain from cancer, pain from cancer treatments... You get the idea.

And by the time I meet these people they are at the end of the line. If they could be fixed, someone would have fixed them already. A pain clinic is the last stop. There is no fix. At its best, successful chronic pain treatment involves improvement, but no fix, no cure. I say “I’m sorry but you’re not going much of anywhere. Let’s talk about that.”

Being stuck with no way out is not a situation for just the infirmed. Most of us – OK, all of us – have been in and will be in stuck places. Loss of a loved one, loss of a job, loss of a future. Loss of limbs and comrades like our Australian veteran [earlier song]... A loss. ...As I was writing this a few weeks ago a colleague of mine had a friend whose husband suddenly committed suicide. He left a widow and two small children. My colleague rushed to the friend’s side but felt helpless. So many unanswered questions – questions that will likely never be answered. Suicide is a particularly painful event for the victim and all those around him or her.

Or maybe we are stuck because we are in limbo. We await a diagnosis, a decision by someone else, something to happen somewhere else. And there is no moving ahead for a time, while we wait. Yesterday my dog got bit by a snake. She’s OK and will be OK but my wife and I found ourselves in a space in which all we could do is sit and wait. ...

I find the universe has such an odd and sometimes perverted sense of humor. You decide to do a sermon on a topic and it thinks it's a great time to send examples your way. As a

Unitarian Universalist I continue to marvel at this phenomenon of synchronicity. I've about given up explaining it. Sometimes I think it is angels. Sometimes I think it is my mother. Sometimes I think I am connecting dots when there is no real pattern. Now I just listen to it and learn what I can.

Back to being stuck. We can be stuck in a situation with no exit. Or we can be in a temporary limbo where we wait for events to untangle and work themselves to the next phase. Or we can be in situation in which we get tired and need to stop. We fight for justice, we fight for a better world, we push and we work, and then sometimes we give out. Burned out. Physically drained. We have no energy to move forward. And we are stuck.

Some hold the view that we Unitarian Universalists struggle with this issue – being stuck. As a denomination we push *so hard* to make the world a better place. I see it here. So many initiatives and projects. Each and every person working and pushing to help move society forward..... I went to General Assembly (GA) last month. It was my first GA, and I encourage every one of you to attend a GA at some point. We have a wonderful congregation here, and it is easy to forget that we are part of an even larger community of like-minded souls. There are so many workshops at GA on so many issues. Social justice, climate change, transformative justice, social witness, white privilege, truth to power, religious education, worship, music... However, GA is not a place to hold a workshop with the title “We’re stuck and it can’t be

fixed.”.... Some hold that UU’s struggle with pastoral care type issues – in part due to this emphasis on action. As a congregation we can end up with names that reflect curious connotative contradictions, like “Caring Committee” and “Welcoming Task Force.” Last week’s service about our pastoral care services and spiritual care team shows that this congregation has intentionally worked hard to address our pastoral care needs. We can and do address “stuckness.” Thank God for our pastoral care staff and the spiritual care team and all the congregants who participate in these activities.

So as humans and as UU’s we strive for movement and change. If we find ourselves stuck we at least resort to palliative care. Helping in some way to bring comfort... “What can I bring you?”, “Do you need some water / money / warm blanket?” And palliative care – making someone feel better – is very good. It is a great way to help.

In the helping world there is such a thing called “rescuing.” It is not seen as a good thing. Rescuing is doing or saying something in an effort to avoid emotions we don’t want to feel. We start conversations, we tell jokes, we go get something, we break the silence. We do this because we are uncomfortable with negative emotions and we want to get away from these feelings, and maybe try to get the person away from their own feelings. Rescuing is running away under the guise of helping. Sometimes it takes reflection to determine whom we are really helping by doing these things

– are we helping them or are we really helping ourselves. The problem with rescuing is that it does not allow these painful feelings to be acknowledged or shared. So the helpee is left to deal with these feelings on his or her own – alone and unshared.

So if it can't be changed – there is no advice or knowledge or latest advance or referral or contact that will help – and palliative care is not needed or has been exhausted, what then? What do we do when we are stuck, or when we are with someone who is stuck?

What we learn from Rita Starpattern, from Naomi Nye, from professionals like the Cancer Support Community and from good psychotherapists, is that we sit together. We share space. We remain in the fire and we acknowledge the fire, together. We just be. And it's OK. In fact, it's more than OK. It's the best thing to do, and it is healing.

I wish I had a more sophisticated answer for you. A technique. A five step process. A factor analysis. But the fact is that it is that simple... And it is that hard. Sitting with someone who is a bad place and has nowhere to turn is very, very difficult. It gives me a knot in my stomach. And when I have to do it, I have to force myself to sit and stay still, not jumping in with a joke or a solution. It is sitting in a fire. Together.

I recently spent two years at West Knox Friends Meeting. Sitting. Sometimes praying. Sitting. Listening. Sitting in silence. Ah, silent meeting. It's an acquired taste... Then I heard a still quiet voice, repeating over and over. I finally listened. And like Forrest Gump, I said "I think I'll go home now." And I returned home to TVUUC. I'm glad to be back.

I think TVUUC is a fountain for our village community. It nourishes us. It is place to sit and discuss next steps and grand visions. But it not merely a wayside park bench for great dialogue, new ideas and a launch point for action. It is - at its best – also a place of healing. Lourdes. A place where we can heal and be healed.

People – us – come here for something. We don't generally come to church to be on committees or task forces. (OK, most of us don't come for that but we wonder if we know someone who does)... We come to join together to make the world a better place. Or to make ourselves a better person. Or we come to be healed: from past injury, from loss, from pain, all kinds of pain. Likely we come for some of all of the above.....Let us be a place of action and of healing. Let us be a place where we can be ourselves and share our failed dreams, our dashed hopes and our crumbled plans. And we need not receive new dreams, new hopes or new plans – but we can engage in a sharing of pain that can not be fixed.

If you're in a stuck place now, I encourage you to reach out. Ask for company. Find someone to share your space with you. It can help.

Maybe we each will move forward again someday. Maybe we won't. All is not revealed to us. But whether our "stuckness" is temporary or permanent, we can share space together. Just sitting. Facing and feeling the fire together without flinching or rescue. That is sometimes all we can do. And it is the most difficult, most powerful and most healing thing we can do.

Reading

from Anne Lamott, **Help, Thanks, Wow: The Three Essential Prayers**

"Most humbling of all is to comprehend the lifesaving gift that your pit crew of people has been for you, and all the experiences you have shared, the journeys together, the collaborations, births and deaths, divorces, rehab, and vacations, the solidarity you have shown one another. Every so often you realize that without all of them, your life would be barren and pathetic. It would be Death of a Salesman, though with e-mail and texting."

Reading

From **Alison Lurie's The Last Resort**

“Having a chronic illness, Molly thought, was like being invaded. Her grandmother back in Michigan used to tell about the day one of their cows got loose and wandered into the parlor, and the awful time they had getting her out. That was exactly what Molly's arthritis was like: as if some big old cow had got into her house and wouldn't go away. It just sat there, taking up space in her life and making everything more difficult, mooing loudly from time to time and making cow pies, and all she could do really was edge around it and put up with it.

When other people first became aware of the cow, they expressed concern and anxiety. They suggested strategies for getting the animal out of Molly's parlor: remedies and doctors and procedures, some mainstream and some New Age. They related anecdotes of friends who had removed their own cows in one way or another. But after a while they had exhausted their suggestions. Then they usually began to pretend that the cow wasn't there, and they preferred for Molly to go along with the pretense.”

Final Words

From **Anne Lamott in Traveling Mercies**

“When all else is said and done, all you can do is show up for someone in crisis, which seems so inadequate. But then when you do, it can radically change everything. Your there-ness, stepping into a line of vision, can be life giving, because everyone else is in

hiding. So you come to keep them company when it feels like the whole world is falling apart, and being there says that just for this moment, this one tiny piece of the world is OK, or is at least better.“