

Sermon – “To Be Comforted or Comfortable”

Eileen Wiviott 9-30-12

When I was ten, my parents had the only fight I had ever seen them have. There were lots of fights in my house but the drama usually unfolded between my dad and my brothers. My mom would cry helplessly and I would be sent to my room. I think I was sent to my room to protect or shelter me from the ugliness. I don't remember what I did when I went there, but I know I didn't find much comfort there. Life was unpredictable in a home with an alcoholic father. One minute we were playing Yahtzee and the next minute a fight would break out. This particular fight was significant because my mom was yelling at my dad for a change, I don't remember why. It was also the fight that led to their separation. Before I went to my room that night, I asked my mom if she and my dad would be getting a divorce. I expected her to reassure me that everything would stay the same. But instead she said, "I don't know." It felt like my life was turning upside down.

The day after the big fight, I went to the nurse with a stomachache at the end of the school day. I expected my mom to be mad at me for not making it to the end of the day. I expected her to think I was faking it. However, when my mother pulled up in front of the school that day to pick me up, she smiled a gentle, knowing smile. She asked me if I wanted something special for dinner that night. She said she'd make whatever I wanted. She knew I was sad about what was happening at home. She knew I needed comfort. She didn't say any of those things and it wasn't a big gesture. I didn't need her to tell me everything was all right, that it would stay the same. I knew hard times were ahead. I just needed to know that she would be there, that I wouldn't be alone. So much of comforting is just being there.

I have done my best, like most parents, to comfort my children but there are times when I've done a terrible job. Parenthood is exhausting. Sometimes you are so raw with tiredness, emotional drain, anger, sadness, even the loving is tiring. Sometimes it feels impossible to comfort anyone, including yourself. From the moment we emerge from the womb, we are continually seeking comfort in our lives. As babies, we cry out for comfort and usually we receive it – from our mothers and fathers, nurses,

strangers walking down the street, pretty much any one who comes in contact with us. We are designed as infants with our eyes too big for our heads and our round cheeks to be irresistible, to draw others to us to comfort, protect and nourish us.

Our society, every commercial we see, promotes the notion that we all deserve to be as comfortable as possible, in our homes, cars, jobs, on an airplane, in the bathroom – we expect and value comfort above almost all else. We look for comfort wherever we go and why wouldn't we? We look to soothe ourselves because there is much suffering, aggravation, hurt all around us. Our ultimate purpose in life is to love and be loved and then we must always lose one another. And that's just the every day, regular kind of pain and suffering. There is suffering that people bear that most of us do not want to even imagine. We are all in desperate need of comfort. We find it in food, drugs, sex, and lots and lots of things we buy.

And, of course, we turn to religion to be comforted. Religion comforts through music, prayer, and sometimes, through a belief in a creator that will make it all right and in a heaven where sorrow will cease. I know religion can and has caused harm in many ways. I also know the longing for comfort is what makes human beings develop, practice, and turn to religion. Many religions provide the comfort of answers to ultimate questions. Our religious movement doesn't do that. Instead, we seek our comfort through community and covenant with one another. We find comfort here through the resonance of our blended voices. We find comfort through inspiring words in worship and in conversation. We find comfort in small groups. Some find comfort in serving in the community, doing what we can to make the world a better place. We find comfort in close friendships that have built over years of rummage, auction events, retreats, friendship dinners, and neighborhood groups. We comfort each other when we're sick, when we have babies, when we lose our loved ones. Comfort is what a religious community is for...at least in part.

The mission of our church is to nurture the human spirit for a world made whole. I love that simple and profound purpose statement. Making the world whole is no small task and we could debate forever how best to do that. There is no one right way to heal the world and we will probably never be done. It is an evolving, unfolding, continual discovery. In part, we make the world more whole by recognizing that we already are.

As we nurture each other, we discover our wholeness. But for now, I want to focus on what it means to nurture.

Nurturing means comfort but it means more than that. Nurturing means tending, encouraging, nourishing, and challenging. When we nurture a plant, we provide healthy, nutrient rich soil, water and a sunny place. We pull the weeds around it, and pick off dead leaves. We may even talk to it. To nurture a child, we feed them, keep them clothed and dry. We say kind words. We play with them. We let them crawl and walk and run and fall down. We help them to learn. We encourage and challenge them. I am always struggling with how much to listen and comfort and how much to offer advice, to help my children see the other side of a problem. Usually, I say too much. Karalee has said to me more than once, "Mom, I just wish I had someone who would listen and understand me." Carla Leone-Sands, a member of the Congregational Relations Team and a family therapist, told me that you should affirm five times before offering a suggestion. Not easy to do.

Comforting all who come to us wounded, grieving, in pain, in loss, or just weary from the demands of every day life, is an essential part of this or any religious community. And nurturing is more than that. Nurturing means comfort and challenge. Nurturing means encouragement to thrive. The human spirit needs someone to say, "I know you can do this. I see something wonderful in you. You can try this and fail and we will learn through it together." These are powerful, life-changing messages that nurture the human spirit. We are co-creators of that nurturing here at the Unitarian Church of Evanston. We are co-creators of nurturing the human spirit for a world made whole, and that purpose is being renewed all the time. Each time a child is dedicated, each time a new member joins our community, each time someone walks in the door for the first time, we rededicate ourselves to the co-creation of that mission.

I have said many times that this religious community has transformed me in ways that I never could have anticipated. When I came here I was pretty happy, fairly comfortable, challenged quite enough, thank you very much, by the demands of being a parent and working part time in a job that was a paycheck but nothing else. The way this congregation transformed my life was not something instant or dramatic. It has been a slow and gradual process of being awakened to myself, to what I hunger for, to

who I long to be. It has been in a nurturing way and a challenging way. I have found people here who I admire and long to emulate and the part of me that yearns for fuller expression of those qualities is awakened and nourished by their example.

Nurturing isn't always comfortable. It requires making room, making space for the new. Sometimes it means encouragement in the form of tough love. It means being honest when someone is doing something self-destructive or in opposition to our covenant. It also means seeing qualities in someone that can be cultivated lovingly into being. It means helping someone find the courage to explore what is unfamiliar rather than staying where things are known, safe, and easy. It can also mean going with someone to bake cookies in a neighborhood where you would otherwise be afraid to go. It means asking someone to tell you what they believe and then listening with compassion and openness.

We nurture the human spirit in this community by living out our Covenant of Engagement, through pastoral care and the caring program, through covenant groups and by challenging each other to lead, to serve and to comfort others. Our covenant of engagement, which we articulated, crafted, and approved together, is a guidebook for how to be in relationship with each other. We created this document together to remind ourselves to speak to each other with honesty, courage and love. We created this covenant to remember that when we are hurt, angry, or confused by someone's actions or words, we need to speak to them directly and give them the benefit of the doubt that their intentions were good. Our covenant of engagement tells us to take responsibility for the well being of this place and its people, to be willing to learn, and to forgive each other and ourselves. Our covenant of engagement encourages us to stick around, even when we are mad, even when someone forgets to communicate, even when someone speaks out of hurt, even when we forget whether our used napkin is compost, recycling or refuse. We remember that we are all doing the best we can and living this covenant is hard. It is extremely difficult and incredibly important to keep returning to it, to keep renewing the promise we make to each other to nurture each other's spirit and all who might find nourishment here so that together we can mend our brokenness and heal the world. This is the vital practice ground for that lofty aspiration.

Unitarian Universalism has a unique role to play in building a more pluralistic religious world. The challenge for us is to cultivate our willingness to plumb the depths of what it means to be religious, rather than to wade in the shallows of a vaguely religious social club. We offer respite for those who have been hurt by religious dogma. But if we are satisfied with being a community of comfort for those who have felt out of place in their childhood religions, and nothing more, I think we're missing something. If we are content to carry our hurt, disappointment, and frustration with our religious past, without asking questions, without a willingness to keep searching, we lose a tremendous opportunity not only to deepen our understanding of ourselves but to deepen our relationships with all beings. We miss an opportunity to genuinely create peace.

Providing comfort and safety, living harmoniously in our religious community are vital but not if it means that we stagnate. We must find a way to deepen the friendships we've already established while remaining present to the possibility of new relationships. We have to remain open to someone whose life would be transformed and who would transform us if only they found entry into our beloved community. Our religious freedom, the freedom to believe what our conscience tells us we must, means little if we're not willing to discuss those ideas, to examine our assumptions, and explore those religious concepts through relationship, if we're not willing to challenge ourselves.

We have talked for many years as a congregation about growth. In fact, it was the reason I was hired, I think, with the expectation that the membership of the church would grow. When we talk about growth, it means much more than numbers. When we think about growth, we have to keep at the center an understanding of why we want to grow. One of the best reasons to grow, in my opinion, is to more fully live our mission – to keep nurturing the human spirit for a world made whole. I prefer to use the word thriving in place of growth because I think it gives a fuller picture of what is happening at our church. To thrive is to grow in health and vitality. We thrive as we provide spiritual nourishment so that people feel inspired to look outside of themselves. We thrive as we offer opportunities for people to talk to one another across differences. We thrive as the byproduct of living our mission and sharing it gladly. We thrive when we truly believe

that Unitarian Universalism is a way of being religious that can heal our world, move our hearts, and change our minds.

We thrive because that's what we must do. We are living, breathing, growing, and dying beings - we as individuals and we as a church. Thriving means change and change is inevitable. It happens, whether we like it or not and changing means dying to who we have been. It is uncomfortable. If we are mindful, we can, at least in part, guide the direction of change as we flow with it. If we are growing in compassion, growing in love, growing in understanding, growing in our ability to make a positive impact in the world, then maybe more people will want to be a part of that thriving.

Some of you attended the workshop with Rev. Keith Kron last weekend, and many of you heard his sermon. What I learned from the conversations during the Beyond Categorical Thinking workshop, is that we have to bring to the surface the uncomfortable realities of our biases in order to move beyond them and identify the more important qualities of a minister we want to call. I think these conversations about whom we want to call as our next senior minister are imperative. It's also important for us to continue exploring who we are as a congregation and who we want to become. Rev. Kron posed three questions to us: Who are we on our best day? Who are we on our worst day? Who are we on an average day? We also need to ask ourselves whether we are looking for a minister who will make us comfortable or if we are looking for a minister who will challenge us. Are we a congregation willing to be moved toward greater fulfillment of our mission?

This congregation is here to nurture each other so that we can thoughtfully, intentionally, lovingly heal the world. We're not here to be comfortable. We are here to comfort each other when we need to be comforted AND we are here to have profound emotional, relational, covenantal discomfort, to have that discomfort and as we inhabit it, to pay attention, to be awake to the discomfort of others and to seek to comfort rather than to be comforted.

For those of you who have joined today and are wondering what you've gotten yourselves into, I know you have entered here for different reasons – some for challenge, some for support. I hope that you find both through nurturing. I hope that you find courage and strength in this community to move forward through the discomfort that

comes from thriving. I hope that you discover the wholeness within you to be manifested in the world. We are co-creators of the world we seek. We are cultivators of the soul building nourishment necessary to thrive and to provide the comfort this world so desperately needs.