



NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

Giving and Receiving

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In the late summer of 2010, I found my way back to New York City from a wonderful year of ministry in Minnesota. Anxious to settle in and start my new position at the Unitarian Church of All Souls, I needed a place to live, and fast. A friend was moving to Los Angeles, and offered me a room in her apartment in the historically Italian neighborhood in Williamsburg, Brooklyn.

Although not my dream apartment in many ways, the place had a large outdoor space into which my friend had invested years of work. She had created two vast flower and vegetable beds that needed to be maintained. A large peach tree needed to be treated for a disease and a spiky rose bush was badly in need of pruning. Tomato vines and corn stalks looked brown and spindly from hot days in the sun. Over enthusiastic raspberry bushes had stretched their thorny branches into a bramble. I promised to take good care of the garden. As the summer died and the winter came I waited patiently to begin gardening. When the spring came again, I hauled away the dead plants and tilled the soil. I hauled in bags of mulch and manure to make it richer. I began to carefully sow seeds and gently tuck in the lanky stalks of seedlings in anticipation of the bounty of summer.

As I spent more time outside, I came to understand both the land and my neighborhood in a new way. I started to see neighbors venturing out into their backyards after a long winter inside. We began to get to know one another as we chatted about what we were growing. I learned that my Italian neighbors to my right only planted basil for the best tomato sauce in Brooklyn. To my left, a young gay man had created a lush garden with his partner, an urban farmer who worked at a farm in Bushwick run by high school students and staff. I smiled as they offered me figs from the tree that stretched over the chain link fence dividing us.

Across the street, there was a fenced in triangle where dozens of beautiful rose bushes and other flowers grew. I wondered who took care of this strange garden, as it seemed to always be padlocked and off limits. One summer day, on my way home from work I noticed an older Italian man holding a hose to water the roses. I stopped to admire his garden. He introduced himself to me and immediately offered me an enormous bunch of blue hydrangeas, handing them over the fence. I will call him Sergio.

Sergio and I began to see one another more frequently as I spent more time outside. We had wide-ranging conversations that spanned from gardening (he knew all there was to know) to the neighborhood history (he had moved there from Italy when he was a little boy and still lived with his brother two doors down).

In his older age, he spent his time cruising around Brooklyn and Queens in his baby blue Chrysler, offering free rides to elderly women needing dialysis treatment, and of course tending his beloved garden. He felt disconnected from the rapidly changing neighborhood, full of younger people like me whom he perceived didn't care about the neighborhood.

Sergio inquired about my work and I told him I was a minister. Every time we talked issues of faith wove their way into our conversation. Raised Roman Catholic, he implied that he had done too many bad things in his life to be considered a good person. Sergio talked often of sin, and wondering about whether he would go to heaven. I told Sergio I didn't know about heaven, but I did know that his helping actions in this life mattered. I reminded him that his rides were essential to older people whose lives depended on their daily treatment and who otherwise could not afford transportation.

I spoke of how many lives he was touching with his garden as younger people walked down an otherwise dirty and noisy street. When I reminded him of these truths, I saw the beauty of Sergio's life unfold like the roses he nurtured. He relaxed and smiled easily, sharing with me all of his wisdom, none of his guilt, shame and fear.

Sergio's story has stayed with me all these years of ministry. I wonder if you can recall a conversation in your life with someone like Sergio. Maybe it was on the subway, or on an airplane, or in a taxi. A person who was unknown to you before, separated by perceived differences of some kind.

Kathleen Billman is a professor of Pastoral Theology at the Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago, where I attended several courses while attending Meadville Lombard Theological School. Like Sergio's story, Billman's definition of pastoral care still resonates with me. Billman emphasizes that pastoral care is always done in the context of a particular time and place, amongst a particular community of people, with a particular set of methods and goals. While the congregation is a gathering place for the practice of such care within, beyond the walls of the church pastoral care fulfills a human need to find meaning and connection amidst contemporary life. She calls a pastoral caregiver: "One who collaborates with others in the struggle to bring forth new life and hope from the creative tensions on 'the boundary'."

Now let's look at this definition carefully, for what it says and what it omits. First of all, the caregiver is someone who "collaborates." They are in a partnership with another person or persons. They are not a sole helper, one whose job it is to fix a crisis situation. The caregiver is someone who serves others in a mutual relationship among equals. The integrative physician and author Rachel Naomi Remen writes eloquently about the difference between fixing, helping and serving in caregiving. She writes: "When you fix, you see life as broken. When you serve, you see life as whole. Fixing and helping may be the work of the ego, and service the work of the soul."

You will also see that this part of the definition is very wide... the pastoral caregiver is not one set apart with special skills or gifts, it is someone who offers themselves in service to another person. Anyone can be a caregiver.

Let's look at this next phrase: "in the struggle to bring forth new life and hope."

Billman's definition points out that struggle is inherent to our lives, as is the possibility of hope springing forth. The struggle for healing and wholeness is ongoing, and we need others to join us in moments of vulnerability and crisis, not only in our joy. Pastoral care is attentive to both, but doesn't try to make light of or diminish suffering. Healing and wholeness can occur when the deep listening and curious, loving presence of another person creates a safe space for authentic vulnerability and discovery of hope. Only then can new life spring forth.

And let's look at the last piece of her definition: "from the creative tensions on "the boundary."

Billman is clear that pastoral ministry in the 21st century is about care for others across boundaries which divide us, small and large. This is not new news. For centuries, pastoral care in religious community has involved going beyond the boundaries of the comfort of the pew and the nuclear family to serve with the "other," the prisoner, the homeless person, the person who is home bound or ill. But what Billman gets at is something deeper and more universal about the nature of relationships in a postmodern world- the inherent "otherness" and isolation in urban life. "Otherness" has become the norm, not the exception, to our lives. While we are more connected than ever through technology, we are in many ways more impoverished than ever in our abilities to create real authentic relationships and communities. Billman identifies the potential differences between people—age, race, gender, class, ability, sexuality, language—as a creative, generative place from which compassionate care can emerge and new relationships can form. "The boundary" is a place between people that can be explored, challenged, deconstructed and softened in a relationship of care. Billman locates the congregation as a place for "unprecedented opportunities for new kinds of relationships that have previously separated people." This could be amongst generations, cultures, ethnicities and theological beliefs. Unitarian Universalist congregations are such incredible laboratories to practice this kind of care.

So putting together this definition of a pastoral care giver one more time, in its fullness: "One who collaborates with others in the struggle to bring forth new life and hope from the creative tensions on 'the boundary'."

Today we are lifting up Neighborhood Church as a community of care. We come together to build this caring community in a very particular context. We live in a city and surrounding area where people can be very isolated from one another, through geographic, economic and cultural divides. Do you remember the 2004 film *Crash*? Directed and co-written by Paul Haggis, *Crash* is a monumental film that talks about the persistent boundaries that separate people in this city. The film uses the ubiquitous car crash as a means to bring strangers into relationship with one another. In the opening sequence, the voice of actor Don Cheadle is heard saying, "In any real city, you walk, you know? You brush past people, people bump into you. In L.A., nobody touches you. We're always behind this metal and glass. It's that sense of touch. I think we miss that touch so much, that we crash into each other, just so we can feel something."

In the film, car crashes reveal the brittle fault lines between people, but also the potential points of connection. I regret to share that I've already experienced this initiation into Los Angeles life. Last Sunday night, as I was meeting a friend for dinner in Silver Lake, screams wafted from the street and all of the diners immediately got up from our seats to rush outside to help. An elderly white man walking across the street with his wife had been hit by a car and injured badly. On the street corner standing alone was a little girl clutching a doll, her brightly colored bag dropped beside her on the ground. I said some words to her, something about how scary and confusing it must be to see this happening. I asked her if I could help her find her family, to which she shakily replied, "The man on the ground is my grandfather."

I told her how people were on the way to help, quickly took her inside and spent the next hour trying to keep her company while joined by various other diners. One couple was celebrating their anniversary dinner, seeing being able to be present for people in the accident as another way their relationship could be strengthened. The little girl's father and grandmother stayed with her grandfather in the street waiting for the ambulance and police.

At one point, hours into the ordeal after we had exhausted every topic from fashion to books to tennis, she became quiet and understandably seemed to tire of conversation. My friend said to her, "Would you like us to be quiet together? Maybe it would feel good to sit on my lap, and I can hug you?" The girl's eyes welled with tears and she climbed into my friend's lap. Her father eventually came back, still wild eyed and in shock but grateful for the support.

As they left for the hospital, we knew we wouldn't see them again, but we knew that our care had made a difference, if only for those brief moments. As we walked out of the restaurant from a back room we had chosen to be sequestered away from the flashing lights of the emergency vehicles, the crowd had changed over and the accident had been cleared. Joined together but for a flashing moment of crisis, everyone was once again busy getting back to living their own lives.

In this city perhaps more than others, there are substantial boundaries to connection. These boundaries make communities like ours all the more longed for and needed. A community where strangers can become neighbors to one another, offering hugs and caring words each Sunday, sharing a meal or a listening ear, an invitation to create authentic connection. Neighborhood Church is a community where we cross boundaries to serve one another. May we see those boundaries not as barriers to connection but as creative potential for healing and wholeness. May we go forth from this place inspired to make a world full of neighbors through our acts of compassion, mercy, justice and love.

AMEN