Sermons

Rev. Kate Wilkinson

1. Four Lessons on Hope

[*Sermon Preached at First Parish Lexington, May 2008*]

My very first day of Divinity School was the day that Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast. I remember because at community lunch that day, before we ate, we prayed for all the people who were in need. We thanked God for our blessings and we prayed for hope.

I'm not sure about you Tim, but my first week of Divinity school I was wondering if I was crazy going into the ministry. What was I thinking??? But on that first day, surrounded by people who took time out in all their abundance and excitement for their own new beginnings to remember that there were people struggling, to take time out in the midst of tragedy to pray for hope, it felt like I was finally in the right place.

Three years later, this hurricane and its aftermath have continued to be a big part of my ministerial formation. Three years later, Hurricane Katrina and the people of the Gulf Coast have taught me quite a lot. And so today, I pass on just some of what has been given to me through my experiences working in New Orleans. Today, I offer four lessons I have received about hope.

So often, when I think about the word hope, that thing that we prayed for at lunch on my first day of Divinity School, I think of Emily Dickinson's poem of that name. The first line just pops into my head. She wrote,

Hope is the thing with feathers
That perches in the soul,
And sings the tune--without the words,
And never stops at all,

And sweetest in the gale is heard;
And sore must be the storm
That could abash the little bird
That kept so many warm.

I've heard it in the chillest land,
And on the strangest sea;
Yet, never, in extremity,
It asked a crumb of me.

Hope is a thing with feathers. I love that. It seems like an embodiment of my definition of hope. Hope is having faith in the good in the midst of the bad, knowing that the light will come even though you are sitting in the darkness. Hope is not giving up. It feels to me like giving hope feathers means that hope can fly us up out of our despair, that it can sing in our darkness so that we do not lose heart. And yes!, hope is sweetest during the storm. Sweetest in those times when you wouldn't think it would be there, but it is.

In the Spring of that first year of school I traveled with a group from my church down to New Orleans, to see for myself the devastation that the hurricanes had wrought. It was worse than I ever could have imagined. We drove for miles through the lower ninth ward, staring in silence at the rubble heaps that had once been people's homes. We saw houses on top of cars and boats in trees. We saw people's belongings poking up out of the debris. We slept on air mattresses at the First Unitarian Universalist Church, where there was still no electricity, even though it was eight months after the storm.

We worked each day on the church building, which had sat for weeks with five feet of water in it. FUUNO, as they call the church down there, has an impressive building. Coming from an urban church where meeting space is rare and closet space doesn't exist, we were amazed by the seemingly endless rooms in this enormous structure. But although we could see the vestiges of a large and active church, the floor plan after the storm was depressing. The pews had been destroyed. The hymnals and the bulletins and the paintings ravaged by water. By the time we got there, all the walls on the first floor had been taken down to the frame because of mold, and we spent time tearing down the ceilings and lugging wheelbarrow after wheelbarrow full of trash out to the curb where we hoped FEMA would pick it up.

And yet each time I made another trip outside through the side door to dump that heavy load, my eyes would rest for just a moment, as I turned and went back in, on the front door. My eyes would rest on the enormous sheets of plywood covering what used to be the entrance to the sanctuary. My eyes would rest on a mural of brightly colored flowers with words painted in black curly writing, "Rebuilding! Get ready for a UU Center for Spiritual and Social Justice Renewal in New Orleans!"

Out of this tragic experience…out of the devastation of their building and the disbursement of their community, the first UUs of New Orleans were making a plan. And they were planning big. They weren't just going to rebuild the way they had been. No. They were going to rebuild the way they dreamed they could be. They were going to rebuild as a center for spiritual renewal and social justice work that was not just for them, but for their whole community. They were going to heal, and they were going to thrive. They were in the dark, they were in the storm, they were in despair. But they could hear the singing. And it was that voice, among all the others, that they chose to listen to.

And so YES, Emily, I am willing to take the words of my first lesson in hope from you when I say lesson number one: hope is a thing with feathers.

I have to admit, I came home from that trip on a sort of high. I had seen a lot of brokenness and sadness, but the overwhelming feeling was one of hope and rebirth. I shared my stories with friends and family, wanting to spread the word of what was happening in the Gulf. And I started making plans for my next trip.

The next trip happened in October. 13 months after the hurricanes. I was eager to see what changes had been made since May. I was eager to continue the rebuilding work at the church (I thought maybe they would be back in the sanctuary by this time) and also to work out in the community. The eagerness, the excitement, did not last long. No, FUUNO was not back in their sanctuary. No, progress was not visible from our last trip. No, things were not better. Not by a long shot. Yes, we worked out in the community, but I could see pretty quickly that not all the damage had been done by the storm. These houses had crumbled long before the wind and waters did their damage. There were other forces that had gotten their first… poverty, racism, bad schools. The storm just made things worse. And now, over a year later, I was having trouble finding hope at all. I saw the storm alright. I felt the darkness. But I didn't hear any singing. And that's when I got my second lesson in hope.

One day, stewing in our anger that our government was spending billions on war and in our sadness that nothing seemed to have changed since May, a few of us spent the afternoon cleaning up a street in the Broadmoor neighborhood so that they could finally have one of their famous street festivals again…the first since the storm. Even though it was October, I can't tell you how hot it was out there, with no shade to hide in. We seemed to be covering very little ground, because there was just so much trash to stuff into our black garbage bags. Basic city services had resumed by this time but trash on the streets was not their agenda. It was an entire city full of trash. We were getting used to the view but knew it wasn't safe for children to be running around at this festival with so much debris littered everywhere.

Hot and tired and feeling incredibly discouraged, we were lagging a bit as we noticed a woman coming out of her house. She was all dressed up, but as she came closer I saw that she was carrying three bottles of water. We exchanged brief introductions as we gratefully accepted her precious gift of water. We told her we were there with our church, that we wanted to help. The conversation coming to a close, she moved forward to hug me, and I put my hand up to warn her, "I am really sweaty! And you're all dressed up."

"That's ok," she said. "You're sweating for us." And she surrounded me in a big, sweaty, Southern hug. It was in that moment that I realized that hope was not absent. For this woman, we were hope. Three people who came down from Boston to pick up trash on her street meant that she and her city had not been forgotten. We meant that people still cared.

So lesson number two about hope: Sometimes, *you* are the hope. Gandhi said, "You must be the change you wish to see in the world."

Lest I sound too full of myself here, quoting Gandhi about my own efforts, I will tell you that Lesson number three about hope was a more humbling one. I can hear my preaching professor telling me that Lesson number three is really a separate sermon, so I'll save the details. But I need to mention it. Because if Lesson number two is that sometimes you are the hope, lesson number three is that it is not you who gets to decide that. You cannot go down to New Orleans and plant a garden in a poor, black neighborhood and think "I am representing hope." Because sometimes to others you might represent something else entirely. You might represent oppression or racism in ways that you never intended or imagined. To that woman with the water we were hope only because she blessed us with that identity. And so lesson number three was much harder to learn than number two. Lesson number three on hope: you can't decide to be hope for others. It's the one who needs the hope, who gets to name it.

On my last trip to New Orleans, just a few months ago, I got my most important lesson about hope. It was one of those times when the universe needed me to see something so much that it decided to spell it out for me, literally.

It was the end of a really tough trip. With lessons one through three on my mind, I was being cautious about hope. I was being tender and careful with it. We had been working further outside New Orleans than we ever had before…in parishes that haven't gotten much help at all in the last two years. Plaquemine Parish had been almost entirely washed away, and St. Bernard Parish was an earie landscape of abandoned buildings and interior-less storefronts. Picture route 1 completely desserted. My group spent two days "mudding" a house in a neighborhood that looked like a movie set because so few people had moved back in. Kids were playing in the empty streets. Yes, it was a school day. No, they were not in school.

I'm not sure how many of you have spent time doing construction work, but "mudding" is one of the most boring and least rewarding construction jobs that I can think of. It involves spreading joint compound that literally looks like mud over the seams where two pieces of drywall come together. The key is to spread on very thin layers of this mud with large putty knives, which get wider and wider with each application, until you can't see the seam anymore, and you have a smooth wall. You have to let each layer dry before starting the next, and sometimes it's hard to see any difference at all. It's slow going. It's boring. It's hard. It takes forever. At lunchtime on the second day Mark, the choir director at my church, and I went outside to wash off our tools. Although we'd begun the day by changing all the words to familiar songs into lyrics about mudding, we'd lost steam as it became apparent that we wouldn't be moving beyond the bathroom we'd been working on for two days. We washed our tools in silence, wondering if we'd be able to get Melissa and her son

into their house by the holidays, the boy's deepest wish for Christmas. Visiting their trailer down the street had made me claustrophobic.

Having cleaned off the blades of our mudding knives we were ready to abandon them to the tool pile. But Mark didn't stop there. "Can you hand me that scrub brush?" he asked? "I think I'm going to try to wash this handle too." I handed him the wire brush and he began to scrub off not just his day's worth of mud, but all the other layers on the handle too, where tired volunteers had given up on perfection. And as he scrubbed, putting in that extra work because in that moment he was able to, letters began to appear beneath the gray suds. Written in black sharpie marker on the handle of the mudding knife, hiding beneath all those layers of mud, was the word HOPE.

So thank you, universe, thank you Camp HOPE, who it turns out lent us the tools for our worksite after labeling them for a safe return, for giving me this latest lesson. Lesson number four: Hope requires something of us. I've learned that I actually disagree with the end of your poem, Emily…when you say that hope never asks a crumb of us. I think hope asks a lot of us. Hope asks us for that extra effort when things don't seem hopeful. Hope asks us to hang in there. Hope asks us to get up in the morning even when we don't think we can. Hope asks us to come back. Hope asks us to wash the handles off of our mudding knives, because sometimes it is the little things that will make the difference, even in a disaster zone. Oh, and I got an e-mail that Melissa and her son made it into their house in time to celebrate Christmas.

I'm sure there is a lot more to say about Hope. And I know I have a lot more to learn about ministry and about life from my trips to the Gulf Coast. But here's what I've learned so far. Hope is a thing with feathers. Sometimes, *you* are hope. Sometimes, you are not. And sometimes, it just takes a little more work to find it.

Amen and Blessed Be.

2. Not Exactly

[Sermon preached at the UU Society of Wellesley Hills, April 5, 2009]

Opening Reading: The Teaching Bean, by Elizabeth Tarbox

When I was a child my stepmother gave me and my sister each a lima bean. She showed us how to dampen some blotting paper and line a jam jar with it, and how to place the bean carefully between the blotting paper and the jar. She told us to stand the jars on the windowsill in our bedroom and keep the blotting paper wet, and watch to see what would happen.

A little later I took my bean out and polished it up with a bit of furniture polish. It was all shiny now and smelled much better than my sister's bean.

In a few days my sister's bean swelled and a strong white root pushed out of the bottom of the bean. My bean just sat there. A week later my sister's bean sprouted a green shoot that forced its way up and out of the top of the jar. My bean did nothing, but began to look wrinkly. In another week my sister's jar was full of roots and shoots and the bean was ready to be planted. My bean shriveled up and fell to the bottom of the jar and I threw it away.

How often have I covered things with furniture polish to make them shiny, to make them smell better? How often in my life have I cared more about the way things looked, and how they smelled, rather than how they really were? I spent half a lifetime covering my feelings with the emotional equivalent of furniture polish, thinking that if I looked good and smelled good the ache inside would go away.

But spirits are not like beans, thank god. They may shrivel with neglect, but as long as life persists there is the chance to wash off the polish and redeem the growing thing inside.

Sermon

I want to share with you a conversation that I had with my nephew when he was three years old. We were sitting at the dining room table when he turned to me and said, "Do you know what happened to my dream?"

"What happened?" I asked.

"It broke," he said. I was astounded.

"How did it break?" I asked.

He shrugged. "It was fragile," he said.

It was fragile. How many of our dreams, like my nephew's, are fragile? How many of our dreams break because they cannot stand up to the pressure of everyday life? I can think of one at least that doesn't hold up against reality well. The dream of being perfect. The dream of always having a shiny bean that looks and smells good. So why do so many of us hold on to such a fragile dream?

Maybe it is because in our Western culture, we are constantly being presented with images reflecting this fragile dream. Images held up as the standard bearers in our lives. Airbrushed models and fancy new cars. Women on TV who clean their homes with big smiles on their faces, and men who never cry.

Have any of you ever thumbed through the magazine Real Simple? I have been interested in simplicity for a while now, and even joined a simplicity circle one year at my church. So I was excited to see a magazine dedicated to the simple life. I was pretty disappointed. Diametrically opposed to the non consumerism I was striving for was page after page, spread after spread of perfect people living perfect lives in perfect houses with perfect matching pillows. One gorgeous couple I read about in this magazine had quit their jobs and moved to a house on a lavender farm which they styled after an English country cottage.

And this, the perfectly situated and decorated and coordinated lavender farm, is being lifted up as the model of a simple life. I'll admit, a lavender farm sounds wonderful! But how attainable is it? And to who? Why isn't there a feature article in Real Simple on wearing your pants twice before washing them? That's simple. And everyone can do it! It's not perfect though. Perfect people probably wash their pants every time, don't they?

No, we are supposed to be not simple, but simply perfect. We are supposed to be thin, agreeable, happy, beautiful people who always get back to every e-mail within the hour.

Even the protestant theology that some of us grew up with holds up the idea of perfecting ourselves as a way of getting closer to God. In this view, God is perfect also. But does that need to be our belief still? Does that need to be our dream for ourselves, fragile as it is?

I understand the pressure to be perfect. It's very real. The women, especially, in my family struggle mightily with perfectionism. My mother introduces herself as a "recovering perfectionist" and her friends tease her that she's not really there yet.

My sister, too, has historically had this tendency toward perfection. Once, when she was at my house and we were working on a scrap book for my mother's 60th birthday gift, my sister turned to me and asked me where I kept my T square. My what? But she was serious. In her mind, a T square was an essential tool of her precise and well aligned aesthetic. Somehow, though, it has just never made it onto my list of possessions. We were forced to do without.

But also in my family was the model of my grandmother on my father's side, whose highest praise was not it's "perfect," but rather it's "good enough." This was her response to us no matter what we brought her attention to…good grades, a watercolor picture we had painted, a life plan. If it was positive, it was "good enough." It used to infuriate me. I wanted to hear, I dreamed of hearing, "it's perfect."

So I, for one, could really use a magazine, or a theology even, whose message is that perfection is not the highest aim. Even my extremely precise sister has begun to see that there is a better message, and a healthier dream to have. Maybe it's having little kids, maybe it's surviving cancer, but her sights are now set not on perfection, but what is life giving, and what is good enough.

On Tuesday, I took my sister to Chelsea, where my friend Cat is a community organizer. Cat is trying to revive a community garden there, and I sort of offered my sister's skills as a landscape architect, thinking the two might connect over this exciting project. No one else in Cat's office is very enthusiastic about the garden project. Faced with the poverty, violence, and cultural barriers between neighbors that they are working to assuage, why bother with this patch of overgrown dirt nestled amidst the rusty skeletons of industrial buildings? In Cat's eyes, though, as in mine, a garden is not just a patch of earth. It is hope. And Cat has a lot of hope in

this garden, which she hopes to transform this spring into something beautiful that will bring the community together. But it's a big project. Enormous.

I watched as my precise sister became Cat's mentor in simplicity. Why refurbish the whole garden, an overwhelming task without much help, when half the garden could more easily be transformed? Save the other half for when more people get excited. Why buy new lumber to replace the rotting, chemically treated railroad ties holding together the beds when the limited money available needs to be used just to cart the unhealthy wood away? People have been gardening in mounds of dirt for centuries. The roots of the newly planted beds will be protection enough from erosion. And are mulched walkways a necessity? No. The trampling of feet will do to maintain pathways for now.

I watched as Cat's dream of the perfect garden, a fragile dream in danger of breaking because of lack of support and resources, transformed into a more hearty dream of a good *beginning* for this garden. A dream that can be sustained and grown over time, but one that will not break under the pressure of perfect.

I stood by, speechless as my sister told Cat "Believe me, I understand about overachieving. But it's not always helpful. Sometimes it gets in the way of taking the next step. Just bite off what you can chew. You can do more later. It'll be ok."

"I think I need someone to tell me that every day," Cat said. "Can I call you?"

"Yes," said my sister. "Call me."

There are cultures in which perfection is not the ultimate aim. The Navajo Rug weavers, for example, have a tradition of always weaving a flaw into the corner of each rug. It is a reminder that, as humans, we are not perfect, and it's where the Spirit moves in and out of the rug. "Perfection," says Richard Rohr, "is not the elimination of imperfection. That's our Western either/or, need-to-control thinking. Perfection, rather, is the ability to incorporate imperfection!"[1]

And in Japan, too, there is the idea of wabi sabi, the beauty of the imperfect. Robin Griggs Lawrence writes, "According to Japanese legend, a young man name Sen no Rikyu sought to learn the elaborate set of customs know as the Way of Tea. He went to tea-master Takeen Joo, who tested the younger man by asking him to tend the garden. [Sen no] Rikyu cleaned up debris and raked the ground until it was perfect, then scrutinized the immaculate garden. Before presenting his work to the master, he shook a cherry tree, causing a few flowers to spill randomly onto the ground."[2] Wabi sabi. The beauty of the imperfect.

Rugs with a bit of color out of place, fallen blossoms on an immaculately cleared ground. Half a community garden tended with care and full of promise. Friends sharing real emotions and not just the shiny ones. I like this beauty so much better than the beauty of perfect. I wonder what we can do to make this our dream, instead of holding on to that fragile one?

Just to clarify, I'm not saying we should be lazy. I'm not saying we should accept all our faults and cease to work towards being better people, cease to work towards justice. But maybe there are some impossible standards that we're holding ourselves to that make us feel bad about ourselves. Dreams that could be put aside for sturdier ones…ones that help us to be less pretend

[1] From ***Radical Grace: Daily Meditations*** by Richard Rohr, O.F.M
[2] From utne reader, september-october, 2001

and more ourselves. I'm asking if perhaps sometimes we *are* better people because we are not perfect.

Remember that the teaching bean, all polished and nice, shriveled and died. Our spiritual journey is not toward perfection, but toward what is life giving. We have each been given a bean, and it is ourselves. We can polish it up, make ourselves shiny and nice from the outside. But how much more life giving would it be to water ourselves so that we may open, that we may grow. We won't be safe inside our shiny polished coats, but we will be pushing our way out of the stifling expectation of perfection, unfurling in the warmth of acceptance, and growing into beanstalks.

Was this what we dreamed of? Not exactly. But it's good enough. And I'm starting to see the value in that.

Amen.

3. Stand There

[Sermon preached at UU Society of Wellesley Hills, May 31, 2009]

Opening Reading: Fault Line, by Robert Walsh

> Did you ever think there might be a fault line
> Passing underneath your living room:
> A place in which your life is lived in meeting
> And in separating, wondering
> And telling, unaware that just beneath
> You is the unseen seam of great plates
> That strain through time? And that your life, already
> Spilling over the brim, could be invaded,
> Sent off in a new direction, turned
> Aside by forces you were warned about
> But not prepared for? Shelves could be spilled out,
> The level floor set at an angle in
> Some seconds' shaking. You would have to take
> Your losses, do whatever must be done
> Next.
>
> When the great plates slip
> And the earth shivers and the flaw is seen
> To lie in what you trusted most, look not
> To more solidity, to weighty slabs
> Of concrete poured or strength of cantilevered
> Beam to save the fractured order. Trust
> More the tensile strands of love that bend
> And stretch to hold you in the web of life
> That's often torn but always healing. There's
> Your strength. The shifting plates, the restive earth,
> Your room, your precious life, they all proceed
> From love, the ground on which we walk together.

Before I begin the sermon, I want to take just a moment to thank you for being such a wonderful teaching congregation this year. I can hardly believe that my internship is already coming to an end, but next Sunday will be my last day here in Wellesley. I owe all of you, and especially Phyllis, many thanks for this experience. I do feel that I will be a better minister because of everything I have learned here.
I wrote a few lines in the newsletter by way of a goodbye, and offered a few of my fondest memories, but I've decided this morning to tell you what my *real* favorite memories from this year are.

I think the first one is of the fall retreat, specifically getting lost on our hike. There's nothing like getting lost to bring out people's true personalities! This is when I really started to get to know people! Certainly one of my favorite parts of this year was the pastoral care visits I made to people's homes. A real learning curve for me was to figure out how to gracefully invite myself over. I learned to be more direct after one of the elders of the community cut me short by saying "What do you want? Are you saying you want to come over?" I was a little embarrassed until she followed up with "That would be great." My favorite services this year were the intergenerational ones, but although very enjoyable, I did learn a few things not to do. It is *not* a good idea to volunteer to decorate 200 cookies so that they look like chalices to give out at the end of the service. And although I would certainly do it again, I learned that it is a little stressful keeping an eye on all the flames when you celebrate Christmas, Hanukkah, Solstice, Kwanza, Divali and Santa Lucia Day all at once. I have many other good memories, including making everyone "uncomfortable" with a sermon about racism, watching Phyllis wheel an oversized shopping cart around Costco as we shopped for a church reception, and listening to how each of the members of the Standing Committee are going to shrink their carbon footprint. You would not believe some of the tactics that these people have come up with!

So, in addition to everything I have learned, thank you, for these memories that I will continue to look back on with a smile. Thank you also for all of your feedback on my sermons this year. I get just one more chance to share my thoughts with you, so here goes…

Sermon: Stand There

Rev. Elea Kemler once joked about why it is that ministers seem to make people uncomfortable. She said, "It is because we dress in earth-colored clothes, and when we shake hands with people, we hold their hands a second too long and gaze into their faces and say earnestly, 'How *are* you?'"[3] But, humor aside, she goes on to say,

> The real reason people find ministers weird and don't really want us to come to their parties, even if they invite us, is because we are too comfortable with death. Like funeral directors, we don't respect our society's fear of anything related to serious illness and dying. We go striding into hospitals and sick rooms as if the smells of cancer and antiseptic don't make us want to gag, as if it's no big deal to sit down by the bed and hold the dry, skeletal hands of someone who is dying, to watch people gasp out their last breath, to murmur words of comfort to shell-shocked relatives.

Kemler goes on to talk about how challenging it really is for ministers to be comfortable with death, and how she can not always navigate so easily between grief and the joy of living. It's something that I think challenges all of us…this ability to sit with someone's grief and pain, and not become consumed by it or flee from it.

[3] "Too Close to Death," from *How We Are Called*, p.50

On the spectrum of skills that we are supposed to learn in this life, I'd put this one at the hard end. And the important end. For ministers, yes. But for all of us really. It is for all of us to learn how to sit with another's darkness, so that we may be better companions on life's journey.

I officially embarked on this learning curve two years ago, as a chaplain at Massachusetts General Hospital. I now understand why our denomination requires aspiring ministers to spend some time working in a hospital. As a chaplain, visiting patients and families each day, I witnessed so much pain, both physical and emotional. And, especially towards the beginning, it was so hard to know how to respond.

What could I say to alleviate the suffering? How could I provide answers to questions like "why is this happening to me?" How could I cheer someone out of their deep sadness? What I gradually learned over the course of my chaplaincy was not the answers to these questions, but rather that I was asking the wrong questions entirely.

I learned that it was not my job, and not particularly helpful either, to try to "fix" the people I visited. The patients had their doctors and nurses to manage their physical pain. They had their families and friends to lift their spirits and distract them from their physical and emotional pain. What they didn't have, most of them, was someone who would sit with their pain. Not fix it. Sit with it. Stay with it. Accompany them through it. And that was the most valuable thing I could offer them.

The Rabbi at the hospital was the one who really brought this lesson home for me. He listened to us student chaplains agonizing about how we didn't know what to "do" for our patients, and he passed on the advice that he had received as a student. It is a different spin on the advice that we are usually given in life. "Don't just do something," he said, "Stand there."

Don't just do something. Stand there. For me, this has been the most helpful advice I have received in my ministerial training. It gives value to that illusive ministerial quality of being comfortable with death, with sadness. It queries that urge for us to do, to move, to fix, and invites us instead to stand, to sit, to be with.

That being said, I will tell you up front that "standing there" sounds a lot easier than it is! Stand there. We are so hard wired in the face of a problem to "do something" that "standing there" takes an incredible amount of work. In the face of someone's pain it seems much more natural to fluff the pillows, offer advice, problem solve, prescribe drugs, distract with funny stories, or…let's be honest…flee, that "standing there" is a difficult task. Standing there feels uncomfortable, useless, awkward, intrusive even.

But let's think back to those times when it has been us that were in pain. Us that were grieving, sad, or depressed. And what was more comforting in our suffering? Someone who ran around tidying our mess, expounded on the benefits of St. John's Wort, told us what worked so well for their aunt's neighbor's sister? Or someone who stood there? Someone who listened? Someone who did not want to fix us or cheer us or flee from us? But be with us, wherever we were on our journey in that moment. What was more helpful?

I think there are a lot of reasons that we are so hesitant to stand there rather than do something. First, we are so afraid of saying the wrong thing. We feel that in the face of darkness we must be the beacons of light, must channel the voice of Mother Teresa in order to give real comfort. We feel inadequate. Also, we are afraid of our own darkness. If we let another person's darkness into ourselves, will it drown out our own hard-won light? We are afraid that taking on another's feelings as well as our own will be too much for ourselves. And third, we are really just not used to it.

I do not want to underestimate how rare it is to have encounters that go beyond the superficial in our culture. It is not our social programming to delve into the depths of our feelings with one another. Just look at the way we greet one another. How many times have you had the following conversation?

"Hi, how are you?"

"Good, thanks, how are you?"

"Good, thanks, how are you?"

You've all had it, haven't you? What's that about? Why must we stay on the surface of things so much so that we don't even bother to listen to the other person's response? Have you ever given an answer other than "good, thanks" to a casual acquaintance's "how are you?" The rebel in me has done this. The look on their faces is one of pure confusion and mild horror. It hardly matters if you say "I'm terrible, actually. I've been depressed for weeks" or "I'm having the best day of my life and I'm so happy to have someone to share it with!" They don't know what to do with either one! They are so surprised that you might even get another "good thanks, how are you?" out of it!

But honestly this isn't how things have to be. There are other ways that people greet each other that do a lot more to honor how the other person is really feeling. In India, for example, it is the custom to *pronam*, or touch the palms of the hands together and bow gently until your fingertips touch your forehead, which means roughly "my soul bows to your soul." In the isiZulu language, South Africans greet each other by saying "Sawubona." Sawubona means not just "hello" but "I see you." Sawubona. I see you.

That is what this concept of standing there is really all about. Standing there, rather than busying yourself, no matter how noble the task, shows that you truly see the other person. Even in the dark. And when we think about it in this way, I hope that some of our fears about standing there can be lessened. We do not have to say the right thing in order to truly see someone. It is our presence, rather than our words, that matters. In a pinch, try this one: "I have no idea what to say."

And we do not, in order to see someone, need to take on their pain or darkness as our own. Rather we can see them, and reflect it back to them, to show that we understand where they are, even if we are not there ourselves.

I wouldn't want any of us to be uninvited from any parties or anything, but I do think that standing there with death, with pain, with darkness, is something we can get

more used to, if we work on it. We work on this here at church in many different ways. We work on it by making candles of joy and sorrow part of our service every week, a time when we are asked to listen to and ritualize the raw emotions of our fellow church members, both the joys and the sorrows.

We work on it by volunteering for Interfaith Hospitality, where we break bread with families going through a particularly hard time in their lives. Our job as hosts is not to step in and fix their circumstances, but to walk with them on the journey as they do what they need to do to get to a better place.

We work on it by participating in Small Group Ministry, where we are asked to sit quietly and listen deeply as each person checks in at the beginning of the meeting. At the start of the year, as Phyllis explained to the small group facilitators how the process of deep listening works, she said, "It might feel awkward not to respond and ask questions, since that is usually how we relate to each other, but how often to we get to talk and truly feel heard?" She said, "This deep listening is a gift that we are giving each other." She is right. Listening to one another, seeing one another, is a gift. And I do think it makes us better ministers, better companions for the journey.

Writer Margaret Wolff came face to face with death when a car accident nearly ended her life. It left her with little peripheral vision and a limited ability to process and communicate in a linear fashion. After the accident, she often found herself lost in familiar places and stuttering in conversation. But rather than losing hope, Wolff began a new writing project that sustained her through the healing process.

She interviewed fourteen women from Sister Helen Prejean to Olympia Dukakis about their spiritual journeys. Inspired by her near death experience, she was not content to stay at the surface level with these amazing women. She deeply listened, then asked hard questions of them and of herself, and found in them fourteen companions for life's journey. She called her book *In Sweet Company*, and opened it with this poem of that same title:

We sit together and I tell you things,

Silent, unborn, naked things

That only my God has heard me say.

You do not cluck your tongue at me

Or roll your eyes

Or split my heart into a thousand thousand pieces

With words that have little to do with me.

You do not turn away because you cannot bear to see

Your own unclaimed light shining in my eyes.

You stay with me in the dark.

You urge me into being.

You make room in your heart for my voice.
You rejoice in my joy.
And through it all, you stand unbound
By everything but the still, small Voice within you.
I see my future Self in you
Just enough to risk
Moving beyond the familiar,
Just enough to leave
The familiar in the past where it belongs.
I breathe you in and I breathe you out
In one luxurious and contented sigh.
In sweet company
I am home at last.

- Margaret Wolff

Friends, the next time someone in our lives is facing a dark time, what will be our response to that darkness? Will we shine our flashlights in to assess and diagnose the problem? Will we take a strong hold and yank them into the light, no matter the glare? Or will we simply reach into that darkness and take their hand, so that they know there is something beyond it? What will our response be to that darkness? Don't just do something. Stand there. In sweet company, I am home at last.

Amen and Blessed Be.

Benediction

The blessings of truth be upon us,
The power of love direct us and sustain us,
And may the peace of this community
Preserve our going out and our coming in,
Until we meet again.
--Duke Gray

4. Web

[Sermon Preached at First Universalist Church of Essex, April 29, 2007]

Perhaps some of you have heard of the game "Six Degrees of Kevin Bacon." The idea behind the game is to try to link an actor or actress, through the movies they've been in, to one of my favorite actors, Kevin Bacon, in less than six steps.

Here is an example from the book *The Tipping Point*, by Malcolm Gladwell. "O.J. Simpson was in *Naked Gun* with Priscilla Presley, who was in *Ford Fairlane* with Gilbert Gottfried, who was in *Beverly Hills Cop II* with Paul Reiser, who was in *Diner* with Kevin Bacon." That's four steps.

Amazingly, this works with even the most far removed actors you can think of. Another example from the book… "Mary Pickford was in *Screen Snapshots* with Clark Gable, who was in *Combat America* with Tony Romano, who, thirty-five years later, was in *Starting Over* with Bacon." That's three steps.

Although I am a big fan of Kevin Bacon movies, I'm not very good at playing this game. Your mind has to think as a spider's does, making web-like connections extending out from the original focus, weaving in and out through names and films, making intricate and delicate patterns. It's just far too complex for me to follow. But I do like to think about this idea, that all these people are connected, if you think about it long enough.

Of course this phenomenon of "six degrees of separation" does not apply only to actors. Many of you are probably familiar with Stanley Milgram's experiment in the late 1960's that has made "six degrees of separation" a household phrase.

Milgram experimented with this "small world" phenomenon through the use of a chain letter. He got the names of 160 people who lived in Omaha, Nebraska, and mailed each of them a packet, along with the name and address of a stockbroker who worked in Boston and lived in Sharon, Massachusetts.

Each person was told to write his or her name on the packet and send it to a friend or acquaintance who would be able to get the packet closer to the stockbroker. The people in Omaha sent these packets out to cousins, college friends, ex-co-workers… anyone who lived closer to Boston, and would be more likely to know the stockbroker. They, in turn, sent the packets on to others. Finally, 24 letters reached the stockbroker at his home in Sharon. Milgram found that most of the letters reached the stockbroker in 5 or 6 steps. Thus the concept of six degrees of separation (Gladwell, The Tipping Point, 34-35).

Again I am reminded of the spider's web, again I am awed by the threads connecting us all to each other. This image of the web has become important to me this year at the Boston University School of Theology, and in my internship as the Mass Bay District Social Action Coordinator. At school it has been useful as I work out my understanding of God as the interconnected web of life. And as social action coordinator I have used this image of a web to help congregations feel more connected to one another in their social justice efforts. We are not working alone. We are working within a network, a web. And it is this ever expanding connection to others which serves not only to make us a more powerful force for change in this

world, but also as the reason we do social justice. We are all connected, and we must tend the web. But it is not enough to be vaguely aware of these connections in an academic sense.

In my life, it is not particularly meaningful to know that I could, if I wanted, get a letter to a stranger in Oklahoma in less than six steps. What matters is the recognition that we are connected to others in our lives—so many others. We are connected statistically, yes, but we are also connected emotionally, physically, importantly. With our minds, yes, but also with our hearts, with our hopes, with our needs and dreams.

The seventh principle of Unitarian Universalism is "Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part." Growing up, I thought of the seventh principle as the "You'd better recycle" principle. It was the principle that reminded you not to litter, and invited you to feel connected to the trees and rivers and stars.

I still do see those lessons in this principle, but I see other lessons, too. That we are not solitary beings making our way through this life. That our connections to others are a responsibility, yes, but also a privilege, and, at times, a saving grace.

A few years ago a young woman named Angela Shelton set out to make a documentary. She was interested in filmmaking, had a summer free, and decided it would be exciting and educational to survey women in America. The challenge was to get a true cross section of Americans. Angela Shelton had an idea. She decided to capitalize on the most basic of connections—her name. Angela traveled all across the United States, looking up, calling, and visiting all of the other Angela Sheltons that she could find. As is the way with these webs, she had no idea where it would lead. She had no idea.

"Is this Angela Shelton?" she would start her phone calls. "THIS is Angela Shelton." She had a few hang ups. She also had successes. 40 of them. The Angela Sheltons she met that summer truly were a cross section of America. They were wealthy and poor, young and old, black and white. They shared only a name. At least that's what they thought.

The other connection that many of these women shared was one that the filmmaker was not prepared for. It was a silent thread that connected them strongly. What Angela Shelton discovered on this cross-country journey was that, like herself, 24 out of the 40 Angela Sheltons she spoke to had been raped or molested.

This is what Angela writes:

"My name is Angela Shelton and I am not alone. I went 'searching for Angela Shelton' when I made my documentary of the same title and found that more than half of the women I spoke to shared more than just their name. They were all survivors of rape, incest, or domestic violence.

"I found that connection to be oddly sickening, especially because I also had been molested and raped during my life. In hearing all of their stories, I felt that I was not alone in my pain and suffering, but making the film did not affect me personally, or so I thought, until I found an Angela Shelton who was tracking sexual predators. That particular Angela lived in the same town as my father, who molested me from ages 3 to 8. The woman tracking sexual predators who happened to share my name lived five miles from my father, and we arrived on Father's Day.

"After hearing all the stories of each Angela Shelton, I was not only faced with my own story, I was faced with my perpetrator. With the Angela Sheltons as angels on my shoulders, I decided to knock on my dad's door for the first time in 12 years.

"The shock of what I did and the effects it had on me did not hit me until I edited the film and was faced with hearing my story over and over. I went through a lot of pain and self-discovery. The simple documentary I planned on making over the summer ended up changing my entire life. By telling my story over and over it soon lost its hold on me and the angels in each Angela Shelton inspired me to love myself and not only cope but to heal." (www.searchingforangelashelton.com)

It's an amazing story, isn't it? The lessons that Angela Shelton learned on that trip across America have stayed with me ever since I saw the documentary "Searching for Angela Shelton." Strength. Forgiveness. Faith. The power of the human spirit. The power of human connections. And she had no idea. She had no idea that these powerful connections to other women with her same name would affect her so deeply, or that she would find the inner strength to use this documentary to break the silence about the epidemic of abuse world-wide.

Denise Levertov once wrote a poem entitled "Web."

Intricate and untraceable
Weaving and interweaving
Dark strand with light:
Designed, beyond
All spiderly contrivance,
To link, not to entrap:
Elation, grief, joy, contrition,
  entwines
Shaking, changing, forever
  forming, transforming:
All praise, all praise to the
  great web.

And how many of you have caught glimpses of this intricate design? How many of you have felt a tug, reminding you of the invisible strands connecting us to one another?

In 1996 my mother found herself at the Park and Ride in Rockland, where she was saying goodbye to friends after spending the day in Boston. As they stood talking, not yet ready to part, a young woman looking very distressed approached them. She was from Uruguay and was traveling by bus from Boston to Cape Cod. She had gotten off the bus in Rockland thinking that she was in Sagamore, where she was to meet a friend for their weekend on the Cape. She had no way to reach her friend, and no way to get to Sagamore now that the bus had departed.

My mother and her friends brainstormed and came up with the solution that my mother would drive this young woman as far as Plymouth, where my mother lives. From there she could get a bus to Sagamore and meet her friend.

As they headed south, the young woman told my mother more about herself. She was 24 years old, and working at an internship in Newton as an industrial designer. There was very little opportunity for industrial designers in Uruguay, especially for women. At first when she came to this country she was terribly homesick. She was lonely and overwhelmed by a culture so different than her own. She e-mailed her parents every day. But as the weeks and months went by, she made friends and gradually transitioned into thinking in English. She started traveling on weekends so that she could see more of the country.

My mother told her that she reminded her of my sister, Sarah, who was then studying abroad in New Zealand. My sister, too, had spent her first few weeks being homesick and e-mailing home daily. Now, like this young South American woman, my sister was meeting new people and experiencing a new culture, across the globe.

When she hit exit 7 in Plymouth, where the bus station was, my mother kept driving. She drove all the way to Sagamore, to the waiting friend at the bus station there.

When the young woman got out of the car, she thanked my mother and said, "I hope nothing like this happens to your daughter, but if it does, I hope someone like you will help her."

Two weeks later we received an e-mail from Sarah, who had been traveling for several weeks on the North Island. Sarah and seventeen of her classmates, along with their professor, traveled in three cars to Gisborne, where one of the students, Fudi, lived on a marae, a village of Maori people. They were to spend some time there, experiencing the culture and studying.

Just a few miles short of their destination, one of the cars flipped over, rolled twice, and landed in a ditch. Miraculously, no one was hurt. My sister, watching this happen from the car behind, was shaken.

Safely at the marae, the students went directly to a welcoming ceremony led by the Maori of the village. After songs and speeches of welcome, each person was asked to introduce themselves. Sarah was first. She said, "I am Sarah Wilkinson and I am from Plymouth, Massachusetts, USA, and I am just glad that we all got here safely." And she burst into tears.

A Maori woman went over to her then, and wrapped her in her arms. In an e-mail to my mother Sarah wrote, "it was the first hug I've gotten since I arrived in New Zealand, and it opened a floodgate of tears." Those two weeks with the Maori people were also the most wonderful and meaningful of her life thus far, she said.

As near as we can figure it, these two events happened on the same day.

My mother recounted this story in a letter she wrote to the residents of the nursing home where she was working at the time.

"A triangle of caring occurred between Uruguay, South America, Plymouth, Massachusetts, North America, and Gisborne, New Zealand," she wrote. "A triangle of caring occurred across continents, across oceans, across ethnicity, across very disparate cultures. And once again I am in awe of the interconnectedness of the human web. May we continue to reach out to each other."

Friends, you can call it six degrees of separation, you can call it the interdependent web of all existence, you can call it a triangle of caring. The point is that we are not solitary beings making our way through this life. Our connections to others are a responsibility, yes, but also a privilege, a blessing, and at times a saving grace. We are not all Kevin Bacons, but we are all part of the web, and when we are falling, it catches us.

I'd like to close with a reading by Robert Weston called "The Web of Life."

There is a living web that runs through us
To all the universe
Linking us each with each and through all life
On to distant stars.
Each knows a little corner of the world, and lives
As if this were his all.
We no more see the farther reaches of the threads
Than we see of the future, yet they're there.
Touch but one thread, no matter which;
The thoughtful eye may trace to distant lands
Its firm continuing strand, yet lose its filaments as
they reach out,
But find at last it coming back to him from whom it led.
We move as in a fog, aware of self
But only dimly conscious of the rest
As they are close to us in sight or feeling.
New objects loom up for a time, fade in and out:
Then, sometimes, as we look on unawares, the fog lifts
And there's the web in shimmering beauty,
Reaching past all horizons, we catch our breath;
Stretch out our eager hands, and then
In comes the fog again, and we go on,
Feeling a little foolish, doubting what we had seen.
The hands were right. The web is real.
Our folly is that we so soon forget.