

WHEN THE WELL IS DRY
The Rev. Julie Stoneberg
Unitarian Fellowship of Peterborough
September 21, 2014

OPENING WORDS

~ Sara Campbell

Ah, how beautiful is this day. How crisp and clean the air. How clear the sky. How full of life the teeming earth. And we are alive! Yes, we feel the beat of our own hearts, the pulsing of life in our veins, the rhythm of our breathing. We come into the silence of this time with gratitude for this day.

We come also with our needs. Our gratitude stirs us to praise and sing our thanksgiving. Our loneliness draws us into the company of others. Our restlessness draws us into these moments of quiet. Our longing for the spirit brings us before the mystery of the holy. Our desire to heal our own wounds and the wounds of our world brings us here to renew our strength and hope.

And we come into this space because we have gifts to share: words of healing and encouragement for those who are burdened; songs of praise and hope; smiles of comfort and affection; deeds of love and kindness.

Each of us comes to dip into the well that nourishes our hungry spirits. Each of us comes with our own cup of goodness to pour into the well. We drink together. May we be strengthened in our bonds of love and peace.

STORY FOR ALL AGES

Julian

~ Anne-Marie Chapouton

(A boy who plays the flute is ridiculed because of his hair, which has an impact on his ability to play.)

READING

Facebook posting of August 12, 2014¹ (Abridged) ~ Anne Lamott

[This] is about times like today when the abyss is visible and we cannot buy cute area rugs at IKEA to truck out the abyss. Our brother Robin fell into it yesterday. We are all staring at the abyss today...

... there is no meaning in Robin's death, except as it sheds light on our common humanity, as his life did. But I've learned that there can be meaning without things making sense."

Here is what is true: a third of the people you adore and admire in the world and in your families have severe mental illness and/or addiction. I sure do. I have both. And you still love me. You help hold me up. I try to help hold you up. Half of the people I love most have both; and so do most of the artists who have changed and redeemed me, given me life. Most of us are still here, healing slowly and imperfectly. Some days are way too long.

And I hate that, I want to say. I would much prefer that God have a magic wand, and not just a raggedy love army of helpers. Mr. Roger's mother told him when he was a boy, and a tragedy was unfolding that seemed to defy meaning, "Look to the helpers." That is the secret of life, for Robin's family, for you and me....

I knew [Robin] when I was coming up, in Tiburon. ...we were in the same boat--scared,

¹ <https://www.facebook.com/AnneLamott>

shy, with terrible self esteem and grandiosity. If you have a genetic predisposition towards mental problems and addiction, as Robin and I did, life here feels like you were just left off here one day, with no instruction manual, and no idea of what you were supposed to do; how to fit in; how to find a day's relief from the anxiety, how to keep your beloved alive; how to stay one step ahead of abyss...

In Newtown, as in all barbarity and suffering, in Robin's death, on Mount Sinjar, in the Ebola towns, the streets of India's ghettos, and our own, we see Christ crucified. I don't mean that in a nice, Christian-y way. I mean that in the most ultimate human and existential way. The temptation is to say, as cute little believers sometimes do, Oh it will all make sense someday. The thing is, it may not. We still sit with scared, dying people; we get the thirsty drinks of water.

...Gravity yanks us down, even a man as stunning in every way as Robin. We need a lot of help getting back up. And even with our battered banged up tool boxes and aching backs, we can help others get up, even when for them to do so seems impossible or at least beyond imagining. Or if it can't be done, we can sit with them on the ground, in the abyss, in solidarity.

MESSAGE

One of my mom's favourite hymns was "Fill My Cup Lord." It's lyrics are based on the story in the Christian testament where Jesus comes across a woman sitting at a well... you might know it...a woman who was despondent, outcast...and Jesus offered this advice, "drink from the well, living waters that never shall run dry."

It's not unusual that I find myself humming this hymn. I can't always say why it rises up in me, but I do know it addresses a not uncommon feeling...an emptiness, a longing, a feeling of being unfilled or unsatisfied....thirsty.

So, I ask the question today, what if the well is dry? What if we cannot find a way to access that 'living water?' What if one has been thirsty for too long and hope of water, or renewal, is out of sight? Is suicide the answer? I ask these questions now, because in the wake of Robin Williams' suicide last month, I felt it would be irresponsible of us, here in religious community, NOT to address it...here, together. What if the well is dry? What if there is no living water?

Yes, I feel called to face the issue, yet I enter in with caution. I am surely not an expert in psychology or mental illness. And, I recognize we tread on the uneven ground of our varied experiences and opinions. Some of you, like I, have been personally touched by suicide. Some among you have been, or even are, suicidal. Some of you have never experienced depression, and cannot understand it. Some of you have strong opinions about suicide as a moral issue...on both sides of that argument. Maybe some of you give it no thought whatsoever.

In an article published in the New York Times in 2008, Scott Anderson writes, beginning with a quote from Albert Camus:²

"'There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide.' How to explain why, among the only species capable of pondering its own demise, whose desperate attempts to forestall mortality have spawned both armies and branches of medicine in a perpetual

² http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/06/magazine/06suicide-t.html?_r=0&pagewanted=print

search for the Fountain of Youth, (why) there are those who, by their own hand, would choose death over life? Our contradictory reactions to the act speak to the conflicted hold it has on our imaginations: revulsion mixed with fascination, scorn leavened with pity. It is a cardinal sin – but change the packaging a little, and suicide assumes the guise of heroism or high passion, the stuff of literature and art."

The question of suicide, and our reactions to it, not to mention our grief in response to it, or our feelings of guilt in the wake of it, is indeed full of contradictions and conundrums. We don't know what to do, or what not to do. I certainly want to prevent suicide, but at the same time, I personally cannot help but support an adult's right to take their own life if the pain is too unbearable. As Dr. Lloyd Serderer said in an interview for *Thrive on Live*³, "People take their lives because of what is unbearable emotional/psychic pain...far greater than physical pain. They're hopeless and believe they are a burden to others." And, we cannot really ever know the depth of someone else's pain.

About six months ago, the UU Ministers of Canada published a position statement affirming the right of individuals who are terminally ill to make choices for themselves in the manner and timing of their death. The conversation that led up to that statement indicated a desire to make a distinction; that there is a clear line between the right of the terminally ill to end their lives and our affirmation of suicide as an appropriate option for anyone, anytime. I make a similar distinction here this morning; I am not talking about Dying with Dignity or assisted-suicide.

I am also not talking directly about the kind of suicide that is the result of self-destructive behaviours, be that alcohol, or drugs, or rage, or high risk activities. Rather, I am focusing on the 'other' kind of suicide...the kind that seems, from the outside, from the perspective of the survivors, to have no good-enough reason, or is ill-informed or impulsive, the kind that is often motivated by depression or mental illness... I think you know what I mean.

I mentioned that I have personally been touched by suicide. When I was a child, my mother's youngest sister, Joanne, died of an overdose that the family believes to have been suicide. Her brother, my uncle Carl, also committed suicide, this in the face of a diagnosis of MS. My neighbour, Butch, whose daughters were good friends with my little sisters, and for whom I often babysat, shot himself in their living room. Daryl, the father of one of my Sunday School classmates, 'blew his brains out'...an image that haunted me as a teenager. A co-worker during my theatre career hung himself from a tree limb not half a mile from my home. Not so long ago, my sister-in-law's father used a rifle to end his life when he found his wife was terminally ill. And then, quite recently, Jeffrey, a dear college friend, hung himself in his Minneapolis apartment. I expect many of you could make a similar list, and another, longer list, of those you know who have attempted suicide.

But a list isn't what matters. What matters is each life. Each of these people was loved. Each of these lives had an impact. And each, apparently, lived a life that felt unbearable and not worth living.

³ <http://live.huffingtonpost.com/r/segment/third-metric-suicide-thrive-/53ed1cb9fe3444b5320002c8>

Stats Canada⁴ says that in 2011, there were 3827 suicides in Canada, a rate of almost eleven suicides per 100,000 people, a rate that has stayed relatively consistent since 1920. The suicide rate for males is about three times higher than the rate for females. Although suicide deaths affect almost all age groups, it may surprise you to know that those aged 40 to 59 have the highest rates. And, married people have a lower suicide rate than those who were single, divorced or widowed.

Citing a number of sources, Wikipedia⁵ says that suicide has been acknowledged by the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples as "one of the most urgent problems facing Aboriginal communities." There is a two- to seven-fold differential in suicide mortality rates among Canada's indigenous communities, relative to the general population, and suicide rates are "five to seven times higher for First Nations youth than for non-Aboriginal youth" and that suicide rates among Inuit youth "were among the highest in the world, at 11 times the national average." And, in their 2007 report, the Aboriginal Healing Foundation noted that while the suicide rate in Canada overall has declined, for Aboriginal people, particularly Aboriginal youth, the rates have continued to rise. "Over a third of all deaths among Aboriginal youth are attributable to suicide."

We are born in order to live, and yet, it seems, some lives seem impossible to live. Buried in the statistics are real, individual lives of people... people who chose to leave the planet too early, at least from the perspective of those who loved them. Their absence hurts. The pain and anguish they suffered while alive hurts. And it is even more agonizing when young people, teenagers, choose to end their lives, before they've really even begun to live. How can those of us who are alive, manage this hurt and change the circumstances that lead people to suicide? How do we deal with the guilt that we feel when we haven't been able to prevent suicide? How might we support others, and ourselves, when such a spirit of debilitation and hopelessness is present?

Again, I'm no expert, but the literature seems to contain some common threads.

If you are someone who has suicidal thoughts, get help. Talk to someone, sooner rather than later. Get exercise. Go outside and stand barefoot in the dirt. On your good days, look for ways to put some distance between yourself and the means by which you might commit the act...make it harder for yourself. Research has shown that even a few minutes can deter the impulse, which is why higher barricades on bridges, ammunition stored separately from guns, things like that, can make a difference. Most importantly, tell someone how you're feeling.

If you know someone who is depressed or suicidal, take notice of them. Feed them a healthy meal. Get them outside. Learn about depression and the actual physical way that it affects the brain (the comic on the front of the order of service comes from a series about depression...found on the blog [hyperboleandahalf](http://hyperboleandahalf.blogspot.com)...that poignantly describes what it feels like to be depressed.) Hug them...for 20 seconds or longer. Remind them that you love them. Sit with them into the next moment, and then the next. And, as Allie, the author of that blog

⁴ <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/search-recherche/bb/info/3000019-eng.htm>

⁵ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Suicide_in_Canada

advises, resist the impulse to spray them with positivity...don't be a giant happiness sprinkler pointed directly at their face.⁶ Most importantly, again, tell them they are loved.

Shortly after Robin Williams's death, I posted two articles on our UFP Facebook page. One was the full version of Anne Lamott's reflection, from which Jovanna read earlier. The other was written for the Huffington Post by Rev. Meg Riley, the minister to The Church of the Larger Fellowship. I posted them because, by my lens, they each contained important truth and wisdom in the face of feeling helpless.

You already heard most of what Anne Lamott had to say, but essentially she owns her own mental illness, despair, and addiction, and with raw vulnerability, struggles with the reality that things do not make sense, and maybe never will. But, she goes on to say that what keeps her going is the 'raggedy love army of helpers'...people who show up with thirsty glasses of water and their 'banged up tool boxes and aching backs' to help others to get up, and when that's not possible, to just sit with them on the ground in solidarity. So, look to the helpers...and be the helpers when you can.

Solidarity is something that Allie (of Hyperbole and a Half) writes about as well...and she found it in a most unexpected place. She tells of lying on the kitchen floor crying, and then spotting a tiny, shriveled piece of corn under the refrigerator. She says that when people ask when was the exact moment that she began to feel less shitty, she tells them about that piece of corn. There was something about "...the way the corn was sitting on the floor...it was so alone...and it was just sitting there..." She concludes, "Nobody can guarantee that it's going to be okay, but the possibility exists that there's a piece of corn on the floor..." I mean, a shriveled kernel of corn showing its solidarity... talk about a raggedy army of helpers! We never know if, or how, our companionship will be an agent of hope and healing.

The other article I posted, by Rev. Meg Riley,⁷ addresses suicide from the perspective of our faith tradition. Speaking to the loss of Robin Williams, and the many ways in which he was loved, she grapples with "the edges of the power of love." Love did not save Robin Williams, love doesn't fix everything, so where is the hope? Indeed, where is the hope?

Rev. Riley admits to being lucky, and I admit that has well. Lucky to have been born without a deep propensity for depression, although I admit to having had my bouts with it, bouts that I mostly manage with busyness and productivity. Lucky to have been born into some degree of privilege...of race, of nationality, of education. This is the uneven foundation of the world; life is NOT built on even fairness. It's not fair that some have more resources than others. It's not fair that some brains succumb to depression and mental illness, and some don't.

But here's the thing. We may not be able to change, or choose, the luck, good or bad, that we've been given. But we can choose to create more fairness...fairness that is created out of our love, our kindness, our generosity, and our gratitude. To choose love is the calling of our faith. Collectively, we can work to create a loving space that holds everyone.

⁶ <http://hyperboleandahalf.blogspot.ca/2013/05/depression-part-two.html>

⁷ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/rev-meg-riley/the-limits-of-love_b_5675096.html

Here's a beautiful example: there is a group of young UUs who have started a project called LovedForWhoYouAre.org. Their mission: "We are a group of Unitarian Universalists committed to spreading the truth that you are already loved for who you are. We believe in love without exceptions. We believe in the power of hope, not hell. We believe in justice over judgment. And we believe in you."

We are the religion that believes in life before death. This is one of the great promises of this faith...to affirm each person's worth...to choose love in the face of injustice and hatred and even self-loathing. We know we can't fix everything...we can't right every wrong. We know it's not perfect, but love is the best we have to offer....to each other, and to ourselves.

Here, may we support and strengthen one another in our common quest for healing, wholeness, and hope. Here, may we offer a thirsty glass of water, and love, to those whose well is dry, and then offer it again, and again, and again. Here, may we affirm the value of life, and the life of every person.

Namaste. You are loved. I love you.

READING *Saint Francis and the Sow* ~ Galway Kinnell

The bud
stands for all things,
even for those things that don't flower,
for everything flowers, from within, of self-blessing;
though sometimes it is necessary
to re-teach a thing its loveliness,
to put a hand on the brow
of the flower
and retell it in words and in touch
it is lovely
until it flowers again from within, of self-blessing;
as Saint Francis
put his hand on the creased forehead
of the sow, and told her in words and in touch
blessings of earth on the sow, and the sow
began remembering all down her thick length,
from the earthen snout all the way
through the fodder and slops to the spiritual curl of the tail,
from the hard spininess spiked out from the spine
down through the great broken heart
to the sheer blue milken dreaminess spurting and shuddering
from the fourteen teats into the fourteen mouths sucking and blowing beneath them:
the long, perfect loveliness of sow.

CLOSING WORDS ~ Mortimer Barron

Go lifted up.
Love bless your way.

Moonlight, starlight, guide your journey
Into peace...and the brightness of day.
Namaste. Amen.