

"Enter the Room"
Rev. David Franks
Sermon Preached at Clearwater Unitarian Universalist Church
February 23, 2020

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It is good to be here with all of you again. I appreciate being invited back because I suspect you wouldn't have invited me back had I had the same experience of the preacher, who after the service, A little boy pulls on the preacher's hand to get his attention. Then says, "I'm going to give you money when I grow up." The preacher says, "Thank you very much but why do you want to give me money when you grow up?" The little boy replies, "My dad says that you are the "poorest" preacher we have ever had." Hopefully, there aren't any little boys here this morning who after this service are going to want to shake my hand.

The last time I was hear we spent some time together reflecting about what the In Betweenness, that you were all entering, felt and might be like, how you can be, going forward. Little did I know that it would be not too long after that Sunday that I was approached to consider if I would welcome becoming your minister of pastoral care while you are in search of an interim pastor. So, I'm a bit flattered, a little apprehensive and a whole lot looking forward to this call to stand with you in embracing how you and I can share in being healing, listening, empathetic agents to one another.

Some of you may know that two days a week I deliver medications to hospice patients. There's been so many occasions when delivering those medications that I felt a strong pull to enter the person's home, take the hand of the one lying in a hospital bed in the middle of their living room, and to be fully present with them. But alas, that is not why I am at their front door. I am there to hand the bag of meds over and get on to the next delivery. There are others who are in pain and need those meds as quickly as I can get them to them. That isn't to say I don't say a kind word, offer a note of understanding by the way I say good-bye to the person answering the door, or how I pat their dog, but it is to say it never feels quite enough.

When I accepted your invitation to be your Minister of Pastoral Care I was then immediately asked if I could bring the message for today, centered on what I understand pastoral care to be. I said sure! Here I get to enter the room, whether that room be in a hospital, a family room, a living room, or at that back of a café, and take the room, the time to be as fully present I hope to be.

We "officially" retired ministers don't get that many opportunities to stand before a captive audience. But there is one thing I've learned about preaching, and I learned it from Rev. Larry Stamper, who was a Methodist minister to the likes of Bob Hope, Johnny Carson, Gene Autrey, a mayor to the city of Burbank, California, and who was my pastor before he was all those things, who was often heard to say, "a good sermon is one with a good beginning, a good ending and that the closer the two are to one another, the better."

You've gotten the beginning with the poorest preacher joke. Let's get going and move toward that ending. I want to put before you that pastoral care basically focuses on three things. Now I did not read these things in a book, or watched a video about them on You Tube, but having read a number of books on the subject, and

spent over 21 years serving congregations, and another 18 years at the side of people living with HIV, pastoral care, as I understand and experience it **is a responsive, rather than a directive**, kind of ministry.

We are most wanting of pastoral care at those times in our lives when we are facing a crisis, or entering into some kind passage of life that calls for us to take note, to recognize the importance of what is taking place, and finally because of either or both of these responses leads to discovering in our lives what we either suspected and/or surprises us about our lives.

I'm sure there is much more that can be said, but this morning I was to focus of those three themes that best characterize a responsive kind of pastoral ministry: Facing a Crisis, Entering into some kind of Passage, and a moment, a time when either, or both of those things, open us to Discover a new way to see, to feel, to think, to take in the meaning of our lives.

I. In Times of Crisis

We've all been there, haven't we? It is often a time filled with fear. Someone whom we love, or maybe it is even ourselves, are facing an issue, whatever it may be, that holds the possibility of loss, of pain, of not having control, the things we may not be able to change, like death, like a divorce, like a job, a vocation, like a diagnosis, and like the list goes on. Are those not some of the things we do our best to avoid when we can. But there are those times when they come to us unwelcomingly and can't be avoided. We find ourselves in crisis. How are we to be for each other then? How does pastoral ministry respond?

First, we enter the room. We move off the porch at the front door. We don't shy away from knowing that we are going to feel something of the loss, or pain, or of not being in control of what that person before us is facing. That's called empathy. We give ourselves permission to go there with another where true listening takes place only after asking permission from the person, we are there to see. Our Listening will admit we don't have a quick healing balm that will make the pain go away; or bring back the loss of a loved one or of a love no longer willing to be in relationship, or to offer a cure without treatment.

In times of crisis our desire, writes Kenneth Haugk's in his book, Don't Sing Songs to a Heavy Heart, is to want to fix things. He writes:

"Suppose you were getting your house ready for sale. A leak in the roof has stained one of the walls. You can cover the stain with wallpaper long enough to sell the house and get out of town, leaving the new buyer to deal with the next rainstorm. Or you can take the more costly approach and repair the roof, then paint or wallpaper over the stain."

"When you relate to a hurting person, you can choose the cheap and easy approach, papering over the other person's pain. Or you can choose the costly approach, listening to find out what the person's real problems are and being there for him or her (them – my insert) in the thick of those real problems." Pastoral ministry isn't good at, nor should it be, at wallpapering. But what it is good at is entering the room where the wall has a stain and the roof that needs repair.

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A couple of weeks ago I met with members of your Caring Circle and will soon be meeting with your Pastoral Care Associates. In our discussion the members of that group spoke of making themselves available to do short term kind of hands on, helping assistance to those in need, such as a ride to the doctor’s office, taking the dog for a walk because of an illness, or preparing a meal because one has a sick relative that must be attended to, or doing a load of laundry because one is exhausted from the trips to and from the student who has lost their way.

But what really stuck out to me in the Caring Circle’s discussion was their naming that sometimes it is difficult for people to ask for help. And sometimes that is difficult because what people are really asking in their request for a given, hands on help with a task is someone’s presence, someone to simply enter their room. And once in the room to listen. Have it not be about me, or even about us, but about you, the person who is hurting, in crisis before you. Did you know the average amount of time before a person speaks up, or interrupts, when another person is speaking to them? It’s 19 seconds? To me that’s jumping out the window. That’s not staying in the room where the stain rests upon the interior wall of another’s life.

I know what it feels like to find it difficult to ask for help. Sometimes it is only when we feel ourselves in a bit of crisis, of feeling overwhelmed, that we finally do so. Those of us in helping professions are often the guiltiest at not knowing, or allowing, ourselves to ask for help.

A year ago, all within the same week, my mom entered hospice, my dog died, and my house sold. My friends offered sympathy and some distraction. But I had a talking with myself and realized, though I’ve always been a pastor, I realized that, as the adage goes that like “a lawyer representing **himself** has a fool for a client.” Sometimes, we may have all the pastoral counseling skills in the world, but we would be wise to know when we need a pastor. And so, I went to my pastor, Andy Oliver at Allendale UMC I told him how overwhelmed I felt, about the events of the week. He simply listened. His eyes kept in total contact with mine. That’s how I knew he was truly listening. He did not jump in with advice or quote some scripture or saying. He didn’t try to fix my pain. All he did was enter my room. When I asked him for his reflection on all that I had shared, he stated, “I think you have courage.” That’s all I needed to hear...to reclaim my courage in what felt to be a fearful, hurting, confusing time.

A famous rabbi known for his intellect, his great good looks, and his ability to speak the language of trees. In the story, Rabbi Yochanan was visiting a sick student of his. He asked the student, “Is your suffering dear to you?” And here “suffering maybe does have more of a Buddhist sense. Yochanan didn’t ask if the student’s illness was dear to him, but rather if his suffering was. Was the student so trapped in the meaning and identity arising out of his illness that he could not let go of it? The student answered no, his suffering was not dear to him. Rabbi Yochanan then bade him to take his hand and he stood him up out of the bed. It doesn’t say that Rabbi Yochanan cured him of his disease. But something changed that allowed the shedding of some of the student’s suffering.

Fast forward in the story, and now Rabbi Yochanan himself is ill. His own teacher, Rabbi Chanina, comes to him and asks if his suffering is dear to him. Rabbi Yochanan says no, and Rabbi Chanina takes his hand and raises him up out of the bed.

Talmud then asks the question: if Rabbi Yochanan had the ability to raise up his student, why didn't he just do it for himself. And Talmud answers its own question:

"A prisoner cannot free himself from prison." In other words, suffering can be a kind of prison, and a suffering person cannot be expected to unlock his own shackles.

In Jewish tradition they have the custom of *bikur cholim*, of visiting the sick. The simple act of visiting, of being present, removes 1/60th of the sick person's pain. Simply from visiting, from being present, from entering their room.

II. In Times of Passage

Sometimes that room does not have a stain on the wall. Rather, it is one that is decorated with balloons, and crate paper, and banners. And sometimes, yes, with gladiolas, the flowers of funerals. (I'm not going to spend a lot of time on this aspect of pastoral ministry, but I do want to lift it up.

One of the rooms I enter when in pastoral ministry are those times when something occurs in one's life that calls out for recognition, to be noticed, lifted up, blessed. These are those times when life offers us a moment to transcend our daily lives, our going in and coming out of each day, and in so doing claim how precious, how significant, life is.

Some of these passages are ritualized; like marriage, a birthday, graduation. In Methodist circles and in native American circles, there is the ritual of blessing a home when someone first makes it their own. In fact, that ritual occurs across the borders of all religions. I know, I investigated the matter when I had my own home blessed with sage, prayer, and lit candles. Something tells me that Unitarian Universalists would be easily comfortable with sage (fire), water, stone (earth), and air. And when these be combined create the life force. And that force enters the room when a passage in life is recognized, lifted up, and blessed.

We have all been part of those times of passage. When you receive your interim minister, and then finally the one who will lead you, be your pastor and teacher; without even looking in your books of worship, I'm confident there will be some marking, some ritual here that recognizes, lifts up, and blesses the new life of this congregation.

Sometimes the occasions that call us to enter the room to again claim the significance in our passages, and in so doing of life itself, are not always common, predictable, or expected. They aren't always in a book, handed down, or put to memory. They do; however, call out to be known. One such significant moment of passage that I was called to be part of and to lift up and bless was the birthing of a baby. Carol, the mom, attended my church. Now mind you, this wasn't yesterday. It was the 1970s. She and her partner and two young sons lived in a converted bus way back in an apple orchard owned by a young couple

whose families were long time members of the church. They were not desirous for luxuries, but they did enjoy some mode of comfort, namely the metal apple bed they converted into a hot tub, the water heated underneath by the fire from the wood of old, dead apple trees.

Carol saw me as her pastor, though she often reminded me that she wasn't into organized religion. In fact, she wasn't much into western medicine either. She had shared with me that the birthing of her first two sons had not gone well, either in a hospital for the first son, or by a midwife at home for the second son. She therefore asked me if I would assist with the birthing of her third child. She wanted my assistance to keep the birthing centered, free from angst and anxiety. She wanted it, in short, to be spirit focused.

Without going into long detail of that day, because I do love telling the story, I ended up delivering that baby, along with the couple who owned the orchard. I saw that baby draw his first breath of life, and once the umbilical cord was cut, the placenta delivered and inspected, we placed that new born son in the middle of us sitting, gathered in a circle at the back of the bus. We marked the passage, the occasion by giving him a name, welcoming him with our blessings, and planting a sampling of a tree in his name to be one amongst the orchard.

Yes, pastoral ministry calls us at times not only to lift up those occasions that says life is here, it matters, you matter, but it can at those times call us to get out of our comfort zones and do a new thing. When was the last time you were so called?

III. Discovery

And this leads me to want to share with you that, whether through crisis and/or a passage, is what we hopefully come to embrace; the discovery of our lives once more. Pastoral ministry, entering another's room, as I understand it, is to enter the search for meaning.

I've read a lot of books in my life, as I'm confidant as have you. And like you, I bet there are just a handful of books whose content has stayed with you. One such book for me is the one written by Victor Frankl, Man's Search for Meaning. He is the originator of logotherapy. Victor was a psychoanalyst, and a Holocaust survivor. From his experience he came to the same realization as Nietzsche: "He who has a why to live for can bear almost any how."

I believe the times of feeling overwhelmed in our lives, in crisis, or those moments when we recognize something important is taking place and needs to be named, are the almost any **hows** in which we discover our **whys**. It is entering that room where we find our meaning.

Victor Frankl put forth that what drives us in life is not the drive to pleasure. Known as the pleasure principle by Freud. Frankl says that what is really the driving force to our existence is our search for meaning. It is less retrospective and less introspective. It is more focused on the future of one's life by reorienting it to the meaning of one's life. In other words, it asks the question, "What is the meaning I'm discovering in the where and how I've been up to in this point in time that helps me to move forward into the future with my life?"

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I'm definitely no scholar of Victor Frankl's works, but I do so appreciate that he raises the right question to ask when entering another's room, whether it be during times of crisis or passage.

When we are asking that question of each other, "*What is the meaning in this,*" especially in pastoral ministry, more questions arise that help us to be about that purposeful question.

You will find out about me that I am most often more interested in a person's questions, and the questions that arise out of those questions, than I am in the answers. The questions are so much more revealing. When I was training and supervising benefits counselors in hospitals or in social services, I always said to the trainee I'm more interested in the questions you have than in the answers you think I want to hear. Your questions reveal to me how far along you are in your understanding of the material.

How many of you here are NPR listeners? I'm a big fan of NPR and Country Music. I listen to NPR all day on those days that I deliver medications to hospice patients. Recently, they had a program in which they interviewed geneticists, artificial intelligent designers, and ethicists. The program centered on the reality that within 5 years we may have the capability to extend human life by as much as 100 years. They predict that people may live up to an age of 250. We presently only know 3% of the make-up of the genome, which contains the hereditary information encoded in its DNA. The bio-geneticists are in search within the genome what they suspect is the aging gene. Once found they believe it may be possible to encode that gene to slow down the aging process. And because the aging process would be slowed, so would those diseases associated with stages of aging, be diminished. So, as I heard it, we would not only live longer but live longer with less chance of disease.

Frankl postulated that humans often find themselves in what he calls, "an existential vacuum." That vacuum can motivate people to fill it by striving for power or for pleasure, neither of which is successful. As a country we see where such a striving for power gained in political status or money has gotten us. It's left us with people at the border, estranged from our allies, creating over-populated prisons, or marginalized youth because of the color of their skin, ableness, gender, sexual orientation or identification.

When, not if, aging is extended beyond what we've ever imagined possible, existential vacuum isn't to go away. It's going to become, I believe, more pronounced. Pastoral ministry will become all the more crucial. It's not going to give the answers to what will become of us while we age beyond our years, but it does raise the question, "Will our lives have meaning? Do our lives have meaning? That's a question we can ask now, and it is the one that enters our rooms in pastoral ministry.

I didn't say the time between the beginning and the ending of this sermon was going to be light. I only said that the distance between the beginning and end would be as close to one another as possible. In this I have obviously failed you. But I can't help but be reminded of a time I was sharing one of those children sermons, a host of little ones seated about me. About halfway through what I thought was a brilliant, relatable children's homily, one little boy, Christopher being his name, stopped listening, tugged on my arm, pointed to the exit sign, over the back door of the sanctuary, and asked, "What's that say?!" I replied, a little perplexed why he would stop me in the middle of my words, "Why, Chris, it reads, exit, E-X-I-T." "Oooohhhh," he said, "I thought it said STOP!" And so, I did. And so, I shall.

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