

Joseph and the Universalist “Amen”

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**Our world is filled with people who harm others,
through their words and deeds of anger, greed, ignorance.**

**Sadly our world has many who suffer
from illnesses and diseases that break our hearts.**

**Tragically, our world has those unfortunate ones
caught in sudden accidents**

**or climate disasters such as we now are witnessing
in Florida and South Carolina.**

**At such times when we experience such people and events,
we can retreat back into our own comfort and even denial,
pretending that the world is otherwise.**

**Or instead, courageously, we can step faithfully into an unknown,
and become vulnerable. We may find within us the courage
to confront hatred and social injustices,
to challenge the powers that be when such challenges are necessary,
to come to the aid of those whose lives (whether human or animal)
have been consumed by illness or disease or some misfortune.**

**Brene Brown, researcher from the University of Houston’s
Graduate College of Social Work,
has studied extensively this relationship between vulnerability and courage.
She asked people *to think of the last time they did something***

*that they thought was really brave
or the last time they saw someone do something really brave,¹*

**Out of 11,000 pieces of data, she found
not a single example of courage, moral courage, spiritual courage,
leadership courage, relational courage...
that was not born completely of vulnerability.**

**She concluded that “we buy into some mythology about vulnerability
being weakness and being gullibility and being frailty
because it gives us permission not to do it.”**

**When we do confront our own vulnerabilities
and act courageously, Brown concluded
we open to a profound sense of hopefulness.**

Such research as hers has found that *hope is a function of struggle*².

**Thinking about this relationship between vulnerability and courage,
I want to share with you an early experience in my life as a minister,
where, at first, feeling very vulnerable and overwhelmed,
I retreated into my own defenses and comfort zones.
But through an internal struggle over time,
I wrestled with this trying experience,
and found the courage to move into a braver stance.**

Joseph was a young man whom I visited in the trauma unit

¹ Brene Brown. *Courage is Born from Struggle*. On Being interview.

² C.R. Snyder's work from the University of Kansas at St. Lawrence.

of Thomas Jefferson Hospital in Philadelphia.

I was just beginning to learn how to be a hospital chaplain.

My first visit to Joseph was extremely upsetting to me.

Joseph had a diving accident in a swimming pool
and was paralyzed by a spinal injury.

He was handsome, in his early twenties,
unable to move, unable to speak.

Seeing him there, I was unable to speak.

What could I possibly say to comfort him?

Uncertain, I introduced myself.

“Hello, Joseph. I’m the chaplain.

My name is Judith Wright.”

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His eyes look back at me.

He is aware of my presences.

I become overwhelmed with anxiety and confusion.

Perhaps part of the pain is that I have two sons his age.

Perhaps part of the pain is that here is a real, living person,
trapped in a body that won’t work ever again as it did before his injury.

I watch myself deal with his suffering by becoming analytical.

I think to myself: “I’ve read of spinal injuries.”

I recall that in seminary we read in our God and Human Suffering Class
about Joni, a paraplegic, who suffered a spinal injury also from a diving accident.
About fifty of us as seminarians read her autobiography,
and then we talked about the theological concepts surrounding her suffering.

“This case is just like Joni’s,” I say to myself.

Thus, with a flick of my mind, Joseph becomes an abstract concept,

“a spinal cord injury.”

Such mind-play creates distance – so that I can escape from the suffering in front of me.

Another mind-play filters in.

I know Joseph is Catholic.

I ask if a priest has come to see him.

His eyes tell me “yes.”

I feel relieved. A priest will take care of him.

I don’t have to do more than this one visit.

I really want to leave the room.

I am unsure of what to do next.

Would he want me to pray with him?

I’m not sure, because, because, I am a Unitarian Universalist and he’s Catholic.

As I stand in front of Joseph, unable to think of what to say next, his parents come into the room.

“Hello, I am Judith Wright, the chaplain.”

They introduce themselves.

“Is there anything I can do for you or for your son?”

The mother says: “Joseph has been here for four weeks.

The only thing left to do is to pray for him.”

I am stunned. She is looking to me to pray for her son.
She has no idea how hard it is for me to be in the room with her son.
She has no idea how hard it is for me to pray at that moment.

The father says: “He goes to mass every week. He has a deep faith.
There is only one God, isn’t there? Please pray for him.”

My mind whirls. “Pray for him? Pray to Whom? What words? How?

I am in a deep state of confusion. I want to leave the room.

I want to leave the hospital.

I want to pretend people don’t suffer like this.

It is too much for me to bear at that moment.

Nothing is there for me but the pain and the suffering.

I somehow manage to leave the room,

saying good-bye and some comforting words to the parents and Joseph.

I feel guilty about not praying for Joseph,

but I know that I am unable to do so at that moment.

I am very aware of the courage and faith of those I leave behind.

Over the course of the next week, I struggle

with my own faith and beliefs about such suffering.

How to articulate my own faith and beliefs.

How to feel them.

How to rely upon my Unitarian Universalist faith and beliefs

in the face of such suffering.

At that time I wished and longed for some religious ideology

that I could turn to,
and that would explain to me such suffering.
I deeply felt the faith of Joseph and his parents,
and yet I knew that the form of their faith – Catholic,
was not the form of my faith – Unitarian Universalist.

I came to realize that I cannot explain away such suffering
through some type of theological or philosophical answer,
such as “it’s God’s will.”

Next, I discovered as I pondered this whole situation surrounding Joseph
that I did not want to pity him.

If I pitied him, I would only feel his pain for a short time,
and then move on in my own life.

I didn’t want to do that.

I realized that instead of pity, which would separate us,
I would have to open my heart and take on some of his suffering.
I would have to believe that my opening my heart space would provide
a place that is generous and loving and kind,
a space where the sacred in me could reach out to the sacred within Joseph.
I would have to open my heart to him.
Such a compassionate space might lead us closer together.
I imagined that if I would be able to be compassionate,
the next time I looked into Joseph’s eyes,
I would sense that he and I are One.

Certainly, great spiritual teachers such as Christ or Buddha have modelled for us how to be compassionate with those who suffer.

“How do I become compassionate?” I asked myself.

“How do I learn to merge with the other, when I am so afraid of seeing such suffering or losing control?”

Here the words of the Biblical St. Paul came to mind:

“My strength is made perfect through weakness.”

I realized that acknowledging my weaknesses can help to soften my defensiveness.

It is acknowledging that I am really uncomfortable when I visit Joseph because he is suffering so much.

It is acknowledging my helplessness and inability to do anything as well.

No longer denying my fears and anxieties,

but accepting them as part of my own humanity,

I would have to become compassionate not only to Joseph, but to myself as well.

Then, I noticed that I had all this agitation and reactivity in my mind.

How could I possibly expect to minister to anyone from such a space of agitation?

I realized that I would need to quiet myself in the midst of trauma.

I would need to cultivate a dispassionate witness (internally) who will tell me when I am becoming reactive.

Once my agitation would settle,

I could then focus solely on Joseph instead of myself.

There would be space, more room inside me to be present with him.

I returned to Joseph's room a week later.

I learn that he is able to move his lips.

I hadn't observed this the first visit, because of my fears and anxieties.

Now that I have more space to be present with him.

I feel less of a need to protect myself from his suffering.

I feel less of a need to "do something."

I asked if he would like for me to pray for him.

His lips say "yes."

I had thought about prayer over the week and how to pray with him.

I wanted to do what would comfort him.

As a Unitarian Universalist I believe that each person is on their own spiritual journey.

I wanted to support Joseph on his spiritual journey.

With Joseph, on this second visit I am less fearful, less reactive.

I am amazed that I can, indeed, read his lips.

It is awkward at first.

I ask him what he would like for me to pray or read.

I finally understand him saying, "whatever you want to do."

So, I read him the 23rd Psalm.

It seems like the right thing to do, as I listen to my heart.

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.
He maketh me to lie down in green pastures.
He leadeth me beside the still waters.
He restoreth my soul.
He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.
Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death
I will fear no evil.
For thou art with me;
Thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.
Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies.
Thou anointest my head with oil.
My cup runneth over.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me,
All the days of my life,
And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

At the end of reading the Psalm,
Joseph reverently says: "Amen."
An amen that surprised me,
because I realized that it was helpful and comforting to him.
I had found a way to connect and be with him
that was real and worked for both of us.
He seemed truly grateful.
I was overwhelmed again.

Here we were. Catholic and Unitarian Universalist,

No longer separated, sharing prayer together..

John Murray, the founder of Universalism,

might have been amazed to see the two of us, in common communion.

The light of God or Truth or whatever we call that which is great than all
yet present in each,

shone through each of our religious traditions and each of us..

We had found common space where we could meet,

and merger and his suffering became a little less.

I had found a way to comfort him.

And he had taught me that in order to truly minister to others,

I would first have to investigate

deeply my reactivity to suffering, my own and that of others.

So, yes, Brene Brown's research is true for me
as I share with you these two pastoral visits.

Hope is indeed found in the struggle.

Courage is found by facing vulnerability,
and moving into the unknown. One step at a time..

Amen to that, Joseph, and thank you. Amen.

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