

Caring for the Human Spirit

Sermon by Rev. Cynthia Davis
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Good morning, so good to see you and grateful you could join in person and virtually and be held in the embrace of this beloved community. As spiritual teacher and author Ram Dass says, 'We are all just walking each other home.' Let's take a deep collective breath of being held by all that is around us and within us. Feel the power and the gift of knowing we are really here together. Thank you for breathing with me.

I am Cynthia Davis. You may know me as a member of this beloved congregation, as a friend, as a partner, parent, or grandparent, or musician. And so, if you didn't know before, or perhaps if this is all you knew of me, I am called Chaplain Cynthia in my role with a local Hospice organization. It was in fact, the call of this position here in Sacramento that triggered my partner and I to leave our longtime home, friends, and UU community in the East Bay and most fortunately, lead us to all of you.

How can we care for our spirit during loss? Why does spiritual health matter? That is what I am going to talk about today. But you are the experts here. For who has not experienced loss? And as we know, loss comes in many forms throughout our lives. I still remember the loss of a bright blue balloon that slipped through my 4-year-old fingers at a small-town Texas carnival. I clung to my father, sobbing, inconsolable.

I still miss that balloon. More losses, no-longer trivial followed, when I was in grade school, I lost my appendix while on a family vacation---that was not fun. I lost my beloved beagle Snoopy in a tragic accident as a young teenager. I was devastated at the loss of love relationships as a young adult. My grandparents died many years ago leaving a large void in my heart. Much later came the loss of friends, some who died far too young and most always far too soon. Then came the time, over a span of years and in my presence, the death of my father, my mother, my stepmother, and my younger brother to cancer. These losses shape our lives. I am in the process of losing some of my abilities that come with aging. Now, as the result of an auto accident, I have permanent nerve damage that has forever changed much of what I do. I know more losses are to come. I bet you know this too, having experienced some of these losses as well.

As a chaplain I have the honor of witnessing those facing devastating, debilitating health issues with compounding losses and those facing the loss of life itself, and I've learned a great deal from listening to these unfolding parts of our lives and I've learned this from many of you here. I see in you and in the patients I serve, courage, fear, and strength, a willingness to name the hard parts, the pain, the sadness, the loss of control as you find ways to care for your human spirit.

How do we find meaning during challenging times, during times of life's inevitable losses? The patients I see every day and their loved ones ask, 'Why is this happening? What is the purpose of my suffering? What is the meaning of it all?' And sometimes I hear..... 'I am not ready for this!' I often respond by saying, 'tell me about what is happening, what

are you noticing? And, what is it like to be you? tell me about your suffering, the pain of your soul? and what is most important in your life right now?’

The patient mother met me at the front door. She greeted me and said, ‘My daughter’s only 17, this is all so unfair. Her father and I do the best we can to care for her, but we don’t know what else we can do. She is not sharing much with us and wants to be left alone. Will you sit with her? She agreed to see you and maybe she will talk with you. Her parents sat together on the couch holding hands, crying as I went down the hallway and entered their daughter’s room. The young patient was aware she was close to dying and wanted peace, quiet, stillness. She wanted her parents to know how much she loved them and was grateful for their love and support but could not take care of them while she was dying. She was finding peace by leaning into her pain and suffering and listening to and living what she needed. How did this mother care for her spirit?-----with HONESTY & INTEGRITY and LETTING IT BE, surrounding her daughter with love and allowing her to die her way.

When I met with Edwin he shared, ‘I just can’t let her go. We’ve been together since we were in high school.....we have two young children and we don’t know how to talk about death with them, I am scared. We want to spend as much time as possible together. How did this young husband care for his spirit?-----with CONNECTION, openness and deep sharing-- he allowed his hospice team to be close to his families’ inner circle, his dying wife and their children and was willing to be vulnerable with us and his family. They cried and laughed together and openly

shared their love and stories. They each named what was most important and the hospice team was there to walk with them and hold them.

Where do you turn for comfort and support when dealing with a loss, a new diagnosis, the unimaginable or deep pain?

The daughter of the patient, Maria, opens the door and says: 'You can see him, Chaplain but don't tell him he's dying!' and don't use the words hospice or END OF LIFE we believe it will be scary and too much for him. How did this daughter care for her spirit? By letting her needs be known, and while some might say she was in denial, others may say she needed time to process her feelings and she needed SECURITY and support from her hospice team in the beginning to honor her wishes. A few weeks later, Maria and her father were discussing the end of his life, as he knew he was dying and had been waiting for his family to bring it up. Her father Carlos shared 'I know I'm dying, but my family didn't want me to know, they wanted to protect me, so I stayed quiet about it' waiting for them to come around.

How did this father care for his spirit? By giving his family time to come to terms with his death and honoring their need to delay the talk.

Everyone grieves differently.

Listening to what we need, taking time each day to check in with our mind, body and spirit and assessing what we need right now can be a sacred gift.

When I met George he said, 'I don't want anything to do with religion. I don't believe in God anymore. What is it you do exactly?'

George was full of rage with God about his terminal illness and today I was the direct and unwelcomed symbol of faith to him. He kept me at arm's length but he allowed me to sit and listen to his anger at all he imagined I represented. His family shared he was angry much of the time, suffering great pain but not allowing anyone to get close to him or his family. George used what was likely a life-long strategy of railing against that 'dark night of the soul.' His spiritual truth was that life was cruel and the hard work of reconciliation was not possible. His existential pain was deep.

Not everyone is willing or able to share their inner struggles and name their pain.

Sometimes I hear: 'I'm Hindu, Buddhist, Pentecostal, Bahai, Muslim, Jewish, Spiritual and not religious, Or, I don't know.....what can you do for me?'

Dan had been a medical professional all his life and never took time to explore his spiritual beliefs. He spent a year in bed and had much time to reflect before he chose to enroll in hospice. He did not share his family's Christian beliefs and wanted to explore Buddhism and if possible, die a Buddhist. We began a time of study and reflection together and I connected him to local resources. He remained curious and thirsty to explore Buddhist teachings and meditation that filled him with inner strength, calm and peace. Later, after Dan's death, his family believed Dan died happier because he explored the spiritual meaning in his life that nurtured his spirit. They had hoped he would

come around and share their faith and in the last six months of his life, Dan's family got out of the way and honored his wishes.

Dan engaged in the creation of meaning through new learning and growth with wonder and awe in his last days.

Last week in Rev. Roger's sermon on mortality, he shared "...neither life nor death is doled out fairly..." and encouraged us to appreciate each day as a Gift."

When I met with Johnny, he was very clear about what he needed spiritually before he died. He could feel death was right around the corner. He wanted the opportunity to name his regrets and the deep sadness and anguish of a tragic time of loss from years ago that he had held in his heart for more than 50 years, not having shared with anyone else. In the privacy and quiet he described painful details, with tears falling down his cheeks as if the events had just happened. He had walked this earth with heavy armor, wanting to protect others from the pain he had suffered. The next day, I was told he had died peacefully.

Johnny cared for his spirit by freeing himself from the burdens he had carried--- and experienced the redemptive power of telling one's story. He turned toward himself with kindness and courage to prepare for his death.

Can we heal spiritual pain?

Savita opened her eyes when I walked into her bedroom and said: I'm ready to die. Her eyes, like her spirit, were full of life as her body was failing her. Savita shared what was most important to her right now.

She was using the last of her energy to prepare her family for her death and for life without her. She said it is the right thing to do and something she could do. It was her last act of love and kindness, her final gift to them. She wanted to offer her niece and nephew a gift of normalizing her death as a part of the natural rhythm of life. Savita's mother was in awe of her strength, her courage, and the compassion she gave the family until her death.

Savita's final spiritually fulfilling gift was to care for her family as she watched them struggle with their own pain and grief.

Rev. Lucy shared during her sermon a few weeks ago that one of the fundamental aspects of religion is to help us navigate suffering through beliefs or rituals or religious structures and that to survive in this world we need a layer of protection, not a thick skin, but resilience. She spoke of the importance of finding ways to cope and not spiritually bypass the suffering of the world or our own suffering and the great need to care for ourselves as we live our suffering, she suggested we dance into it, paint, write or sing into it, and not ignore it as it can help to bring more healing into the world.....

Author Richard Groves believes it is important....” to regularly examine what gives life meaning as carefully as we measure our blood pressure or cholesterol levels. Facing our mortality highlights what we truly love. He believes in the importance of examining our personal priorities and that whatever we pay attention to in life will grow more important to us as we near death.”

Oftentimes, it takes a tragic event for us to name our own mortality. Have you ever sat down with family and friends and discussed the topic of death or shared your beliefs about what happens when you die? Many of us were not raised in a culture that talked openly about loss and the meaning of it all. How different would our lives be if we were not a death averse society? How many of us have ever discussed the fragility of our lives? I encourage you to do so. How does one begin? How can meaning be found in the most challenging of times? You and the patients I serve are my examples of living life and creating heaven here on earth. Here, in this community we know we are part of something greater than ourselves.

I will end with these words from anthropologist and Buddhist Priest Roshi Joan Halifax: "Love and Death are the great gifts that are given to us. Mostly, they are passed on.... Unopened. The call is to open up the treasure box of life and death, now, do it now." As we are all just walking each other home. May the blessings be, and may it be so.

Please rise in body or spirit and join the singing of our last hymn.
Life Calls us Home

