

Take Care

A Sermon by Rev. Jackie Clement

Delivered at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Bloomington-Normal, IL

May 11, 2014

Words of Welcome:

When the seat belt sign illuminates, you must fasten your seat belt. Insert the metal fittings one into the other, and tighten by pulling on the loose end of the strap. To release your seat belt, lift the upper portion of the buckle. We suggest that you keep your seat belt fastened throughout the flight, as we may experience turbulence.

There are several emergency exits on this aircraft, forward, and aft. Please take a few moments now to locate your nearest exit. In some cases, your nearest exit may be behind you. If we need to evacuate the aircraft, floor-level lighting will guide you towards the exit. Each door is equipped with an inflatable slide which may also be detached and used as a life raft.

Oxygen and the air pressure are always being monitored. In the event of a decompression, an oxygen mask will automatically appear in front of you. To start the flow of oxygen, pull the mask towards you. Place it firmly over your nose and mouth, secure the elastic band behind your head, and breathe normally. If you are travelling with a child or someone who requires assistance, secure your mask first, and then assist the other person. Keep your mask on until a uniformed crew member advises you to remove it.

Reading: "People Who Take Care" by Nancy Henry from *HARD*, (adapted)

People who take care of people
 get paid less than anybody
 people who take care of people
 are not worth much
 except to people who are
 sick, old, helpless, and poor
 people who take care of people
 are not important to most other people
 are not respected by many other people
 come and go without much fuss
 unless they don't show up
 when needed
 people who make more money
 tell them what to do
 never get dirt on their hands
 never mop vomit or wipe tears
 don't stand in danger
 of having plates thrown at them
 sharing every cold
 observing agonies
 they cannot tell at home

people who take care of people
 have a secret
 that sees them through the double shift
 that moves with them from room to room
 that keeps them on the floor
 sometimes they fill a hollow
 no one else can fill
 sometimes through the dirt and blood and tears
 they go to a beautiful place,
 somewhere those clean important people
 have never been.

Sermon:

Today is a day we celebrate mothers—mothers of all stripes—the mothers who brought us into the world, the mothers who nurtured us into adolescence and adulthood, mothers to whom we are related by blood, mothers to whom we are related by wisdom, care, and affection, mothers who are women and mothers who are not. Nurturing constructs no boundaries of gender or DNA or age. It requires only a heart that connects to another.

There is a classic Russian fairy tale called *Vasalisa the Beautiful*. The plot runs much as the tale of Cinderella. On her death bed, the beautiful and kindly wife of a woodcutter bequeaths to her only daughter a doll. She tells her to be good to the doll, always taking care of it and feeding it when it is hungry. In return the doll will help her and keep her safe, the role the mother would have played if she had lived.

Enter the wicked stepmother and stepsisters each as cruel and petty as Vasalisa is good and helpful. To rid themselves of her the stepsisters set Vasalisa an impossible task of getting fire from Baba Yaga, the witch. But her mother's doll helps Vasalisa accomplish the task by giving her advice and providing the correct answers to the witch's questions. When she returns home, the fire she was sent to gather burns Vasalisa's tormentors to cinders. Vasalisa, naturally, goes on to marry the czar of Russia.

The story of Vasalisa offers the classic fairy tale wisdom that a mother's gifts help their children to learn their own strength, to use that strength to navigate the world, and to manifest their strength in service to others. As Dumbledore put it "to have been loved so deeply, even though the person who loved us is gone, will give us some protection forever." Isn't that what we celebrate on this day—the lasting protection of those who have given us the gift of knowledge in our own potential to shine, the gift to take that journey toward wholeness and to ultimately manifest it in service to others?

The hymn we just sang speaks of this great circle of care, of how the nurture we receive from others both teaches us how to care and impels us to live out that care for others. We care for those of the next generation, but we are often called on to be the caretakers for spouses, friends, others of our own generation, as well as those who once cared for us in younger days. We become, in our turn, the caregivers. The parents who lovingly tend to children living with physical and emotional challenges. The grandparents raising the children of a missing generation. The spouses honoring vows to cherish in sickness as in health. The adult children caring for aging parents. The sandwich generation caring for many at the same time. Daniel Paris, a

geriatric social worker at Mass General in Boston says that, “caregivers are ordinary people caught up in extraordinary events.”

Such caregivers do the tasks of daily living. They cook and shop, they bathe, listen, play games, give rides to the doctor, help fill out the necessary paperwork to navigate the systems of care. They sit up in the night and rise early to get the coffee on.

As life expectancy increases and we Baby Boomers age, the needs for long term care increases. In 2009, ten percent of adults and five percent of school age children in the US were living with disabilities. Persons 65 years or older represented 12.9 percent of the US population, about one in every eight. By 2030, that number should reach 19 percent. Further, it is estimated that one quarter of all people in the US over 65 and half of the people over 80 need daily assistance. As the need for care increases the numbers of those asked to take on caregiver roles will likewise grow.

According to the book *Caregiving* by Beth Witrogen McLeod, the typical family caregiver is a 46-year-old woman, employed outside the home who gives another 18 hours per week to caring for her 77-year-old mother who lives nearby and has at least one chronic condition. Two thirds of caregivers hold jobs outside the home, a 50 percent increase in a decade. And while it is increasing acceptable to take time from work to care for a sick child, it is less so for an ailing parent and certainly for not to care for someone who is not a family member.

The poem by Nancy Henry spoke of professional caregivers, but things are much the same for those who tend to the needs of family members or friends. Their work can go unrecognized or be devalued. In many cases they are doing the hardest caregiving tasks of all, not the care that will end when a child matures into adulthood, but care where the only known end is the death of a loved one, a death they cannot prevent, no matter how big the love. It is care fraught with the stresses and guilt of watching someone they love suffer, feeling like there is nothing they can do to alleviate that, knowing there is nothing they can do to avert eventual death, worrying that they are not doing enough, guilty for all their own reactions of impatience or perceived failures.

When this work of caregiving becomes our work, how do we do it with the best possible outcome for our loved one, for ourselves and for all the others to whom we are responsible? To become a caregiver can be to cross a threshold into something that is unexplored and possibly even threatening. It will call us into relationship in new ways with the person for whom we are caring. It could upset the familiar patterns of generations. We may bring expectations that can never be met, and encounter the same from others. The tasks of caregiving may be highly pragmatic, but the work is spiritual work. It is often more about emotional wellbeing than physical health. Long after the doctors’ visits, long after the meals are cooked and the linens changed, the relationship remains with all that brings with it, easy and difficult, fulfilling and challenging. Even when the body can heal, room must be made for the spirit to heal as well. And when the body will never heal the healing of the spirit becomes even more critical.

Acting as a caregiver has the potential to change everything, to burst open our hearts and our notions about ourselves, to alter our ideas of joy and grief, to show us new ways to live fully, present to the pain and the joy that fits within the span of a human lifetime. It can call from us those deepest gifts we were once given, gifts we may not have known we possessed—the

knowledge of our own shining strength, the ability to use that strength to navigate the world and the ability to use it in service of others.

It *can* do those things, but it can also sap our strength, weigh us down with worry, surface old resentments, and leave us awash with guilt that we cannot produce superhuman efforts of giving endlessly and selflessly. Here are two things that I think can be important in moving us through the challenges and getting us to the transformative possibilities.

Number One: Secure your own mask first. There is a reason flight attendants tell us to put our own masks on first. Because if you can't help anyone else if you run out of oxygen yourself. In fact, not only will you not help anyone else, you'll just make more work for the guy who now has to rescue you both.

It is no different in spiritual work. Do your own work now, so you can have enough oxygen to help when you are needed. And for goodness sakes don't stop breathing once you committed to the work. Being present for others in whatever ways they need us requires that we know what it is that grounds us, that nourishes and sustains us for the work. It isn't about getting yourself all perfectly together or knowing all the answers before you can help. If that were the case we would never any of us move a muscle. It is our imperfections as much as anything that can compel us to give care. What I'm saying is that it is far easier to be of help if you can understand equally your strengths *and* where you are not equipped to go; can return yourself to what grounds and sustains you *and* can ask for help when help is needed. As Clarissa Pinkola Estes wrote about *Vasalisa the Beautiful*¹, "To be strong does not mean to grow muscle and flex. It means meeting one's own numinosity without fleeing... It means to be able to learn, to be able to stand what we know. It means to stand and live."

Part of this is knowing where you find nurture, part of it is managing your own losses in a way that makes you available to meet people where they are. And a big part of it is knowing why you are doing the work at all. If you feel trapped into it by circumstance you may achieve a much different relationship than if you feel called by your love for someone, by your sense of justice, by dedication to principles of duty and community, or by whatever it is for you personally that brings you care for others.

Understanding your own resources, your own motivations and your own feelings is critical to being available to others. Again, it doesn't mean that you are 100 percent there before you start, but don't ignore your own care in service of others. Caring for yourself will only make you stronger in service.

So that's number one, secure your own mask first. The second thing I would offer is the concluding message of Nancy Henry's poem—know that the work of caregiving has the potential to take you to places others do not know, places you have perhaps not known before. When we understand why we come to the work and the ways to sustain ourselves through it, caring for others, serving others, can take us to rare landscapes. It can transform us.

Caregiving can be difficult for all the reasons Henry's poem states. It can be physically difficult and even dangerous work. It is often devalued or invisible to others. It can be emotionally

¹Clarissa Pinkola Estes, *Women Who Run with the Wolves*

wrenching to be present to another's pain and since relationship is at the heart of caregiving it can surface old wounds and struggles. It calls us, often, to be in the presence of grief and pain. *And* it can offer something that dwarfs all those challenges.

Many theologians, poets, and mystics have written about the liberation possible in suffering. It's not about finding meaning in suffering. I am not a big proponent of the idea that there is any inherent meaning in suffering. The meaning lies in the first prayer we learn in hospital chaplaincy: "Please don't let me run." It is about being able to be present to another's sorrow or pain and not run. This is where the holy resides, in the space held between those who suffer and those who accompany them despite their own fear, their own anxiety, their own grief.

The poet Rumi wrote these words:
 I saw grief drinking a cup of sorrow
 And called out,
 "It tastes sweet,
 Does it not?"
 You've caught me,"
 Grief answered,
 "and you've ruined my business.
 How can I seel sorrow,
 When you know it's blessing?"

Holding on to that possibility of finding the blessing may be what it sometimes takes to get us through when what we offer is not accepted or appreciated, when we feel inadequate to the task or downright helpless, when the person we are trying to help lashes out or doesn't recognize who we are any longer. It is dangerous work; soul work always is. But depending on how we respond to the challenges there are amazing possibilities for love.

Rachel Naomi Remen put it this way in her book *Kitchen Table Wisdom*: It is natural, even instinctive to prefer comfort to pain, the familiar to the unknown. But sometimes our instincts are not wise. Life usually offers us far more than our biases and preferences will allow us to have. Beyond comfort lie grace, mystery, and adventure. We may need to let go of our beliefs and ideas about life in order to have life.

On this day, let us celebrate those who have given us care and those who present us the opportunity to give care. May each enrich and deepen our lives. May we know that people who take care of people have a secret that sees them through, and may we each have the opportunity to know that beautiful place.

Namaste.
 Por lo tanto puede ser.

2014© Jacqueline R. Clement