

Sacred Belonging for All
Unitarian Universalist Church of Vancouver
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Be Someone's Angel© by Sue Oshiro-Zeier

Many years ago, as a Registered Nurse, for several weeks I took care of a gravely ill man on a lifesaving ventilator. His eyes looked through me; he wasn't fully present. Despite his hazy look, I would talk to him as I cared for him. The patient eventually got better, could breathe on his own, and left the Intensive Care Unit (ICU).

A few weeks later, a visitor to the hospital approached the ICU to ask if we'd allow his friend to see where he had been a patient. He couldn't remember his ICU stay; a part of his life was missing. ICUs have strict visiting policies, but we allowed him to come in. The man saw me and gasped, "You're real! I thought you were an angel!" Tears streamed down his face when he realized that the "angels" who cared for him in his bleakest hour were real people, not celestial beings.

I was stunned. Me, an angel?! I was doing what nurses do: provide good nursing care, nothing extraordinary. But witnessing his reaction was very emotional for me; a reminder of why I became a nurse: being compassionate and relieving suffering was an important guiding light.

This experience also reminded me that the most important time is now—being fully present—and that the most important person is the person in front of us, whether they're a person we're "supposed" to help, a friend, or a stranger.

The "right thing to do" might be giving someone else what they need the most as they struggle in the fog searching for a way forward. Kindness is immeasurable. You may be someone's angel, their salvation—even if it's just them calling you for the third time, looking for reassurance or help to navigate technology.

As we journey through this period of despair, I feel better knowing we are traveling together. Some of us have lost jobs, are in marginalized communities, and/or feel vulnerable on numerous levels. Knowing how important it is to get through this time together, may we all choose to extend kindness to one another.

Sacred Belonging for All© by Rev. Kathryn A. Bert

We probably should have punctuated my sermon with that choir piece – it's such a good inspirational ending! *When we unite in purpose we are greater than the sum of our parts and Good done anywhere is good done everywhere*, sings the choir.

That is where we are headed, but first I do begin with a few reflections on homelessness – one of our seemingly intractable problems that affect the most marginalized, adding to their marginalization and creating a vicious cycle that makes it very hard to escape. It's not that I'm any expert on the subject by any means, but as we continue our study of Cultivating Compassion and the Caregivers role in Deepa

Iyer's social justice ecosystem, homelessness and the housing crisis demonstrate the value of both this spiritual theme and this social justice role.

The Caregiver in Iyer's social justice ecosystem is one who nurtures and nourishes the people around them by creating and sustaining a community of care, joy, and connection. Sue OZ – Oshiro-Zeier, which many of us shorten to OZ, Sue OZ's reflection demonstrates that caregiver role so beautifully, and it doesn't escape me at all that Sue is often the lay leader in this congregation who reminds us most often of the need to create joy in our work together. She made that point just last Sunday in the Q&A session with the Rev. Sarah Millsbaugh. I think also of the mother in our story for all ages who tries to turn the painful experience of staying in a shelter into an imaginary and fun fantasy of a palace with riches and relationships. Caregiving involves making our experiences less painful and more pleasant, talking to the patient in ICU who may or may not hear our voice or remember the vision.

When we speak of people experiencing homelessness, we are really speaking of two things that are missing from their lives. It is not only a shelter that is missing, but also a network of social connections. Kevin F. Adler, founder of Miracle Messages, a nonprofit that helps people experiencing homelessness, wrote *When We Walk By*, a book he co-authored that recasts chronic homelessness as a byproduct of twin crises: the failure of both our social services systems and our humanity. The miracle messages are messages he records from people who are homeless to their estranged families or loved ones, sometimes resulting in reunions.

The California Statewide Study of People Experiencing Homelessness is the first truly representative sample of people experiencing homelessness in the country in 30 years. It's called the Big Homelessness Study. I'll share with you a few of the things I learned from this study, which you may or may not already know... This comprehensive study involved interviews with 3,200 people in California, and was conducted alongside with people who have lived experience of homelessness. Dr. Margot Kushel is a physician who treats homeless patients, and was the lead investigator in this study.

48% of people experiencing homelessness are age 50 and older. It is an aging population. I know this is true for the Vancouver area as well. Many of these people experience homelessness for the first time after the age of 50. Most people live rough near where they last had a home or shelter. It is a myth that people move to California or Portland or Vancouver or wherever to be homeless, and if you think about it, that doesn't make a lot of sense why people would move further away from where they last had social connections and a home.

Only a third of the population uses illicit drugs or alcohol 3 times a week or more. Dr. Kushel calls methamphetamine a drug "perfectly designed for the modern era of homelessness" because it allows people to stay awake all night so they can prevent assault or getting their stuff stolen and it quells hunger. That was an eye opener for me. Dr. Kushel believes it is not fair to ask people to give up the drug before providing housing or services. She is a proponent of "housing first" policies, a policy, by the way, that follows the science, and was first implemented during the George W. Bush administration, you know, that radical left wing president. It's been settled science and bipartisan until only recently, when politicians seem more intent on gaining political points than solving actual problems.

Two thirds of the people experiencing homelessness have significant mental health symptoms, and as Dr Kushel points, out, who among us wouldn't have severe anxiety or depression while experiencing

homelessness? Mental health problems can precede homelessness, of course, and lead to it, if one isn't well enough to navigate life. And we know that homelessness exacerbates mental health issues.

I learned that 35% of people experiencing homelessness want treatment for their addiction or mental health, tried to get it and couldn't. This means we don't need to argue over whether or not to force people into treatment – that political theater is a rather moot point, since we can't seem to provide treatment to the 35% who want it. That's what we should focus on. And when people want treatment and get it, their chances of success are so much greater.

Two years ago, city officials in Vancouver declared a state of emergency, because of the growing number of homeless people but also the number of deaths among them. It allowed the city to access emergency reserve funds and streamline some processes. The problem remains that there simply isn't enough housing to help people move into, and so shelters remain full. The rate of homelessness is locally dipping, however, and so these efforts appear to be working, albeit slowly. The experts involved in the Big Homelessness Study suggest, however, that local governments are limited in what they can do – that to truly solve this problem, the federal government will have to step in. And at least for the time being, that seems highly unlikely.

Why should we care about homelessness when the federal government is currently shut down and the President is handing out political favors to his personal friends, and trying to prosecute his enemies? Because there are those among us experiencing homelessness, and our neighbors are suffering, and the crisis is real, and we can do something about it.

Our Universalist ancestors taught us that God is Love, that everyone is saved, that we are all in this together, that we share a common origin and a common destiny. There are no disposables among us. We either care for all, or none. I say let it be 'all.'

Many of us marched yesterday, for the salvation of us all. The messages on our signs varied, but the bottom line was the same – we are a democracy of the people, by the people, and for the people. And when we say 'people,' we mean all the people: Trans people, immigrants, Queer, homeless, children, veterans, Brown and black people, young and old people, white people, Muslims, Pagans, you get the idea.

Let me focus just a second on the people who are trans. LGBTQ youth are overrepresented among young people experiencing homelessness and housing instability in the United States. I don't have the break down on folks who are specifically trans. But I have been delighted that since the election, many trans folks have found this congregation. I'm sorry it's because they're being targeted on the national level, but am glad they have found their way here. I've been a little concerned that our own unfamiliarity with people who are trans or nonbinary may have made our welcome less than ideal at times, and so I just want to put in a plug here for a class being offered by the Beloved Community Work Group. Information was in the Friday bulletin about a learning opportunity through discussion groups using material from the Transformative Hearts Collective, that will help us all be more welcoming. It is my hope, additionally, that by spring, we will have successfully moved to having gender neutral bathrooms in this building. We'll maintain the single stall bathrooms in the other building. Our speaker next week is a minister who is trans, who has fled the state of Missouri after a wave of proposed legislation aimed at restricting trans rights. I hope you'll welcome the Rev. Lazarus Justice Jameson next week – and they invite to dress in drag, if that sounds like fun to you.

I think back to the Caregiver role in the social justice ecosystem as one who nurtures and nourishes the people around them by creating and sustaining a community of care, joy, and connection. I think next week will be joyful, and that joy is important in a world that is so very cruel to so very many, and getting meaner every day.

Lest you become overwhelmed by the need of the world, and the need is great, remember to cultivate compassion. Compassion is a skill we can learn that allows us to be with another without losing ourselves in their overwhelming need. Compassion activates a different part of the brain than empathy, and that part of the brain invigorates, rather than drains us.

Here's an invitation to practice compassion: Try volunteering to serve a meal at Share Vancouver. You can do it with other Unitarian Universalists from this congregation – go down together and meet some people who are experiencing homelessness. See that they are neither the worst nor the best stereotype of a person who is homeless. They are real people, suffering in real ways, that real companionship and a good meal can help alleviate. Alleviate, not solve. It will take a lot more to solve. But let us not fall into the trap of doing nothing because we cannot solve everything. *Good done anywhere is good done everywhere*, sang the choir.

Last week, the Rev. Sarah Millspaugh was in the pulpit and she was sharing the work of contemporary author, teacher, and activist adrienne maree brown and what is called “Emergent Strategy.” Though she didn't share this in her sermon, she did share with the Board over the weekend the nine principles of emergent strategy. She talked about the 9th principle in her sermon, “what you pay attention to grows” but I think the first and seventh principles are relevant to my topic this morning. The first principle of emergent strategy is: Small is good. Small is All. (The large is a reflection of the small.) and the 7th is: Focus on critical connections more than critical mass – build the resilience by building the relationships.

So many of us freeze and do nothing when facing the enormity of such problems as homelessness – it feels intractable, and impossible to affect. But emergent strategy that says small is good, that the large is a reflection of the small, this strategy reminds us to engage on the smallest scale possible – human to human, and by so doing, we affect the larger things we cannot understand. *Good done anywhere is good done everywhere*. And the 7th principle, building resilience by building relationships, helps us focus on critical connections over critical mass. It was a great mass demonstration yesterday, and that's wonderful, too, but it is the quality of relationships that build resilience, and that happens person to person.

Rev. Sarah said last week that “adrienne maree brown often returns to this quote from her mentor Grace Lee Boggs. “‘Transform yourself to transform the world.’ [adrienne explains] This doesn't mean to get lost in the self, but rather to see our own lives and work and relationships as a front line, a first place we can practice justice, liberation, and alignment with each other and the planet.”

It's the place where we start, but not where we end – it from this first place that we begin, and out of which justice, liberation, and alignment with each other and the planet grows and develops. It is how we answer the call of love.

We answer the call of love in large demonstrations, such as took place yesterday, in our community, in our country and in places all over the world. Abraham Lincoln said that “our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are

created equal.” These words were said at the dedication ceremony for the National Cemetery of Gettysburg in Pennsylvania, where one of the bloodiest and most decisive battles of the Civil War took place. “It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us -- that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion -- that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain -- that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom -- and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.”

A government of the people, by the people, and for the people is a government that should ensure all its citizens have shelter and food and the basic necessities of life. And until that promise is fulfilled, we answer that call of love in our small acts of service, too, human to human, such as serving food to the hungry and meeting someone new. We are building resilience by building relationships, and doing what it is we can, no matter how small or seemingly insignificant. Emboldened by faith, by our Unitarian Universalist faith, we dare to proclaim, we are answering the call of love.