

“Attending to Our Shared Humanity”

Sermon by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval

Unitarian Church of Montpelier

November 10, 2019

The delivered sermon may have slight variations from this written manuscript. Audio recordings of sermons can be found online at <http://ucmvt.org/worship/sermons/>.

Reading

“Everyday Grace” by Stella Nesanovich

It can happen like that:
meeting at the market,
buying tires amid the smell
of rubber, the grating sound
of jack hammers and drills,
anywhere we share stories,
and grace flows between us...

A woman rises, gives
her name, Mrs. Henry,
then takes my hand.
Suddenly an ordinary day
becomes holy ground.

Sermon

I don't know what it is about public transportation, but many of my spiritual lessons have come while I was riding the train or the bus or waiting in an airport.

Several years ago, while I was living in Washington, DC, I was on a bus up 16th street returning home after a long day of work. It was dark and rainy that night, and I was seated up front close to the driver. The bus was crowded. As is often the case on public transportation, most everyone was absorbed in their own world - staring out the window, or with their nose in a book, or their eyes cast upon their smartphone screen taking in whatever scroll of news or text messages or notifications were coming their way.

Most people weren't really paying much attention to one another.

I, myself, was mostly absorbed in my own thoughts reviewing the day of work ("Did I really say that snarky thing to my co-worker?") and looking ahead to dinner preparations and the evening at home.

The bus stopped to let on more passengers. One person got on and their hands were full of bags most of them damp now from the rain. The person seemed a little bit out of sorts searching around for their fare and talking to themselves.

The bus was crowded and this person seemed like they could use a place to sit. I was getting off soon anyways, so I offered them my seat. Wordlessly, they squeezed into the spot where I had been sitting. And I grabbed the nearest pole so I wouldn't fall down as the bus lurched forward.

And then the person who was now sitting where I had been did something unexpected. Silently, they handed me a few of their bags. The seat was quite crowded and they couldn't keep all the bags up on their lap as they were attempting to do. I was slightly startled by this presumptuous demand and hesitated for a second. Then, without a word, I took the bags and held onto them.

For a few minutes, we all rode along in silence. The other passengers continued whatever they were doing - scrolling through news articles or texting friends.

Jolted out of my own preoccupations, I realized what a special moment this was. Holding onto these bags, I was invited to share this stranger's load for a few brief moments. I thought about what other burdens this person might be carrying. I thought about the emotional and spiritual burdens I was holding. I thought about the weight of it all.

A few wordless minutes later it was time for me to get off the bus. I handed the parcels back and went on my way.

There are so many moments that we share in the vicinity of one another. Moments in which it is far too easy, despite our physical closeness, to not truly see one another. Moments when it is so much easier to tune others out and to keep our distance.

Keeping our distance could mean simply not noticing the people around us. How often, in the rush of our days, do we put those groceries in the cart or walk briskly down the sidewalk, without really noticing those around us? Or, now, with the ever-present distraction of our smartphones and devices, how often do we find ourselves absorbed in a screen rather than present with those who are right there with us, perhaps even asking for our attention?

Sometimes, keeping our distance means relegating another person to a particular, convenient box or story that keeps us feeling safe and secure in our own worldview. It can be especially easy to do this in the midst of a heated conversation or a tense meeting or gathering. All of a sudden, the person right in front of us becomes not a person but the source of our frustration or anger or discomfort, and, therefore, wrong or confused or misinformed.

I know I would like to think that these tendencies to tune out and to distance ourselves from others are the rare occurrence in my own life, but it probably happens more often than I'd like.

The spiritual challenge is that when this distancing becomes habitual, it is dehumanizing. This dehumanization, unfortunately, is supported by a broader culture that attempts to use this kind of distancing to sow division for political gain. It is in the toxic, racist, xenophobic, transphobic, and misogynistic rhetoric coming from the highest elected office and trickling down into our political discourse. It is in the labels that so many of us use far too easily for those who are different from us or with whom we disagree.

The antidote to this broader inattention and dehumanization on the most basic, personal level, is to tune in. To allow our awareness to rest fully upon the other.

What changes when we truly pay attention to one another?

Sylvia Boorstein writes, "Imagine how our lives might be if everyone had even a bit more of the Wisdom that comes from seeing clearly. Suppose people everywhere, simultaneously, stopped what they were doing and paid attention for only as long as it took to recognize their shared humanity."

This is a big supposition, but let's go with it for a moment.

First, there's the stopping.

Oh, how difficult this first part is. Paying attention means first stopping what we are doing.

Wow. For a do-er like me, that is a hard one.

So often, when we are busy 'doing' or so focused on a particular objective - whether it is to finish washing these dishes or send off that e-mail or get to the bank and the post office and get a flu shot all before my lunch break is over - when we are 'doing' we can lose sight of those with whom we share space and air and community - especially those who are in our closest proximity.

Sometimes the stopping what we are doing actually means shifting **how** we are doing our doing - shifting how we are going about the routines and day-to-day of just getting by and living our lives. Shifting enough to notice those around us.

Earlier in the fall, on one those glorious days of sunshine and warmth when the leaves were just starting to turn (can you remember?), I was sitting outside on State Street eating my lunch. I noticed that there was a man sitting on the sidewalk across the street near the crosswalk. He had a sign out and a small container for collecting the change and dollar bills that the occasional person offered him as they passed by.

Just a few feet away a young waiter was busily serving food and clearing tables outside of Positive Pie in the parklet seating area they had for the summer months. I noticed him glancing at the man seated on the sidewalk. After a few minutes, the waiter went over to talk to the man. I couldn't hear what he said from where I was, and I wondered. Had someone complained about the man and his sign? Was he asking him to leave? And then the waiter went inside.

He came back out to wash down tables and then a few minutes later went back inside and emerged with a small box. He walked over to the man seated on the sidewalk and handed it to him. He accepted it and opened it up and eagerly, it seemed to me, took those first few bites of the slice of pizza he had been given.

Boorstein writes, "Suppose people everywhere, simultaneously, stopped what they were doing and paid attention for only as long as it took to recognize their shared

humanity. Surely the heartbreak of the world's pain, visible to all, would convert everyone to kindness.”

This world we live in can be rough—bruised up by scorching words that fly off the keyboard and into the twitterverse faster than can ever be retrieved, calloused by cynicism that treats one’s best efforts as naive or useless, and sharpened by the strident claims of who is right and who is wrong that cast some as ‘us’ and some as ‘them.’

In this roughness, tenderness becomes that much more of a needed balm and a source of strength, and even resistance.

When we are truly paying attention and looking for the humanity shared with another, I think we can’t help but soften.

Those rough edges that serve to keep us apart can become places of potential connection rather than division when we stop long enough to recognize our shared humanity and take in someone else for who they truly are.

To truly pay attention, sometimes we need to set aside the story that we want to ascribe to someone else. I needed to do this riding the bus that evening in Washington, DC. If we set the story aside, we might realize that we are each fighting our own internal battles.

Miller Williams writes in this short poem:

*Have compassion for everyone you meet
even if they don't want it. What seems conceit,
bad manners or cynicism is always a sign
of things no ears have heard, no eyes have seen.
You do not know what wars are going on
down there where the spirit meets the bone.*

When we turn our attention more fully to one another, our compassion is bound to follow. Sometimes, we need to be taken out of our routines and habits for this compassion to emerge.

The photo series, "Touching Strangers" by Richard Renaldi is an example of this. In the series, he asks complete strangers to pose together by physically touching in a way that is usually reserved for close friends or family. In one photograph, a young man robed in the typical garments of an observant, Orthodox Jew (long beard, black suit jacket, black top hat) is arm in arm with a young, Black man with dreadlocks.¹ The image itself speaks to the intimacy that is possible between human beings and also the barriers that too often keep us from that vulnerability and intimacy.

It is likely that the two men in that photo, Shalom Laskar and Jeff Desire, had no further interaction with one another after that photo session. I like to think that this brief moment of proximity with a stranger unlocked a place of understanding that may not have been available before.

Can we imagine what it would be like for them, or any of us, to reach out beyond the interactions and relationships we are hemmed into and experience one another's humanity in a different, more attentive way?

Here in our church community, I have witnessed this happen on a number of occasions. One of the most meaningful aspects for volunteers of the Evening Warming Shelter, I have heard, is being offered an opportunity to interact with people in a way that challenges the stories we might have of other people, especially people who have a different life experience and background. The same can be said of our Monday Community Lunch.

Eating a meal together or playing cards, some of you have had the chance to pay attention in a different way to someone else - someone you may not have had any other reason or way of getting to know.

So often, it is this who are closest to us - those most physically proximate to us - that it is easiest to ignore or to give the least of our attention. And yet, the proximity we share with others so often presents the greatest opportunity for paying attention and being changed in the process.

As Stella Nesanovich writes:

"It can happen like that:
meeting at the market,

¹ <https://lens.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/07/05/strangers-in-embrace/>

buying tires amid the smell
of rubber, the grating sound
of jack hammers and drills,
anywhere we share stories,
and grace flows between us...

Suddenly an ordinary day
becomes holy ground.”

This ground is made holy when we share our attention with one another. When we stop to hear one another’s stories. When we allow our proximity to be a space of awareness and deep listening. When we are willing, even for a few brief moments, to share in carrying one another’s burdens and to be changed in the process.

Mary Oliver writes that “Attention is the beginning of devotion.”

May we be devoted to knowing the suffering, the basic humanity of another.
May we be devoted to the safety and wholeness of one another.
May our attention be the root of the love and the care and the fighting for one another
that we take up as we lift up our shared humanity this day and every day.