



## September's Theme is Renewal

### Renewal

By The Rev. Heather Janules

As I write this reflection, we are half-way through the summer with July behind us and most of August ahead.



Ah, summer!

Traditionally, summer is a slower time for me as it is for many, a time to catch our breath after busier times, to soak in the sun and lush growth of the season and to prepare for the coming Autumn. As Ralph Waldo Emerson famously wrote, "in this refulgent Summer, it has been a luxury to draw the breath of life." His words again ring true. I hope, by the time you read this, you too have come to this place of renewal.

Renewal is the theme for September, a fitting focus for our return to more active collective ministry. Through our ingathering, we will be renewing what it means to be part of the community and hopefully renewing our spirits through this reconnection.

Yet, I am mindful that this past summer may have not been as restorative as others. Whether it has been the

tweet or bad news of the day or the latest article about the Coronavirus or personal challenges or losses, many of us may have had our own "dark night of the souls" in the midst of all the heat and sunshine this summer. Simply, these are long-term hard times for many reasons. Renewal – as we often say in Family Worship, in "our hearts, our minds and our spirits" – may be harder to come by.

I have been trying to remind myself that simple acts of renewal are not optional right now; they are required. Metaphorically, if there is a crack in the bottom of our cup, adding a little water every day might never get us to overflowing but may keep us spiritually afloat.

An example of a simple act of renewal: on the afternoon that the wind and rain from Hurricane Isaias blew through our area, my heart was heavy. A number of people I care about deeply were going through incredibly hard times. The storm was a figurative expression of what seemed to be happening amid too many human lives.

It was then that my cat, Sheina, came over for a snuggle. If you have had cats, you know that they are often motivated by their own needs and agendas so I

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## October's Theme is Deep Listening

### Listening as Love

By Kye Flannery, Summer Minister



Chaplains get to practice deep listening a lot, sometimes 7 or ten hours a day (Thinking back for a moment to those nights on emergency on-call!). So in keeping with this month's theme, I thought I'd share some of what I've learned about the art of listening. Deep listening is a practice of moving beyond what's polite and expected into what's real - which often includes uncomfortable emotions, but emotions which reveal truth. The opportunity to improve our listening is ever-present -- in an argument, in a presidential debate, with a grieving friend or a family member looking for a new job.

Here are some basics that have served me well:

#### Being a courageous ear

- I often think of chaplaincy as **excavating** -- learning something new (for them and for us as listeners) means delicately brushing around the edges of things that are unknown to us and maybe then, truths perhaps frightening or painful. Or we could envision a garden at night -- they know this land a bit better, and can lead us. This is in some

ways an **embrace of passivity** -- which can also be active and courageous, as anyone who has studied martial arts will know. If we are tentative and allow them to lead us, if we don't assume or step on someone's garden, a person may choose to confide in us about something more vulnerable: about how it is to be themselves in the world. They may talk about a divorce, a fear, a disability, an experience of doubt or failure, a microaggression experienced on the basis of race or gender - something very sensitive on the vulnerability scale. This is a place to take a deep breath and match the courage, even if that just means saying, "wow, thank you for telling me about this, I can hear how hard that is."

- **Mirroring is very courageous.** To say "Here's what I heard you say, did I get it?" is not the way we typically communicate. To say, "Wow, can you say more about that? I'm not sure I understand" is a basic communication task, making sure we are on the same page, but it is one we hardly ever employ in polite company -- nobody wants to be thought boring or stupid. But it is such an offering of respect to have the courage to risk embarrassment -- because hearing this person in front of us is that important.
- Brené Brown has a great video on listening with sympathy as opposed to empathy. When we are willing to touch the place of grief, fear, loss, uncertainty, for ourselves, we can truly "resonate with" someone.

#### Being a friendly ear

- **We are often very unkind to ourselves without noticing - we can provide neutral space for others to do work, a space free from unkindness.** There is often a gentleness and kindness that is not being extended within ourselves, when we encounter a problem we need to talk out. Small aside comments ("I'm always.../I never..." "I'm sorry," "I really shouldn't...") can show that a person's expectations for themselves, and how they may feel about themselves in this moment --

## Listening as Love

whether they are shattered, curious, disappointed in themselves, or working on building up the voice of self-respect. This is also true for people who are yelling at us, frustrated or angry -- likely they would not fight if they had a more pleasant option accessible. When we can offer friendliness even when our partner is feeling defensive, we can build trust to learn about a person's more vulnerable emotions.

- **Unconditional positive regard.** This is an idea which came from therapist Carl Rogers, who helped to break open a counseling tradition which was much more focused on identifying pathology than on a person's resilience and ability to manage life's challenges. Rogers felt that a person could not effect meaningful change in their lives without really caring for themselves in each stage just as they were in that moment. A good listener can model that each step of the way. So how does unconditional positive regard work? In divinity school, I had the good fortune to spend a semester learning from Buddhist teacher Lama John Makransky. He spoke about metta practice as 'bathing' ourselves and others in pure, uncomplicated love -- envisioning, for instance, a little puppy in the grass, stretching and rolling in the sun, and how much appreciation and adoration we want to heap on that puppy, just as it is. To practice unconditional positive regard, I put myself in that mindset -- I'm here to welcome each part of you, even the parts that are not developed, even the parts you're not so sure you want around, especially the parts that don't measure up.
- **Knowing our own triggers/stumbling blocks, so we can hold that friendly space.** In listening more deeply to others, we also must practice listening more deeply to ourselves. We are listening to our heart, our mind, our instincts in the moment, while also sorting out what's just for us, and what will help to say aloud as this person is walking their path. When chaplains train, we listen particularly for the places where our own wounds or stories might overtake or overwrite what is actually being communicated to us -- examples might include:

- Sometimes when I try to pay full attention to someone else, my to-do list breaks in with a sense of urgency, and I have to force myself back to attention. Why does that happen? How can I make a commitment with myself to give the gift of my presence? What is the source of this urgency and anxiety?
- My own journey with dad/mom has been fraught, so I find myself fidgeting and skeptical when someone talks about their relationship with their mom/dad. What is the healing that I must undertake in order to feel I understand the feelings that are coming up? Is it a closeness I'm missing? Do I know how unconditional love feels? Can I practice that with myself?
- My heart feels so tender right now, whenever someone asks how I am, I re-center the conversation on them. What in me needs care right now?



### Being an insightful ear

- We don't gain insights without deepening the conversation -- helping the person to state not just events and feelings but meaning:
  - "So that sounds like a very old argument

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- between the two of you, like it points to deeper core questions you all have been working out for a long time.”
- “I can imagine you felt hurt! And especially when that came from someone you admire so much.”
  - “You mention that your folks are Catholic, do they place a lot of importance on their faith?”
  - Understanding beneath the surface - what is the “song beneath the song”
    - This is ninja-level, once we know how to listen to ourselves and clear out the space to listen to others
    - Sometimes people who speak with big ego -- if they don’t communicate their own story and greatness right out front, there can be a fear there.
    - This can include helping people to name what they’re really saying, even when they are not sure:
      - “It sounds like you’re saying your needs really aren’t being met”
  - One thing that might not be immediately evident... is when listening, when we really want to keep focus on the person we’re listening to, it’s best to use the experience of the stories of our past, without actually telling that story in the moment --
    - If you are listening to someone who has lost a grandparent, you could say: “My grandmother died, and it was terrible, she was one person who understood me without judgement -- I think of her almost every day.” Or you could say: “Were you close? Yes? I’m so sorry. Sometimes our grandparents can be very close to us, without the judgment we might fear from other places.” The second paves the way for the other to tell a story, while the first invites them to process your story with you, perhaps responding with “Oh, i’m sorry, that’s so hard,” and perhaps even distracting you from the topic at hand.

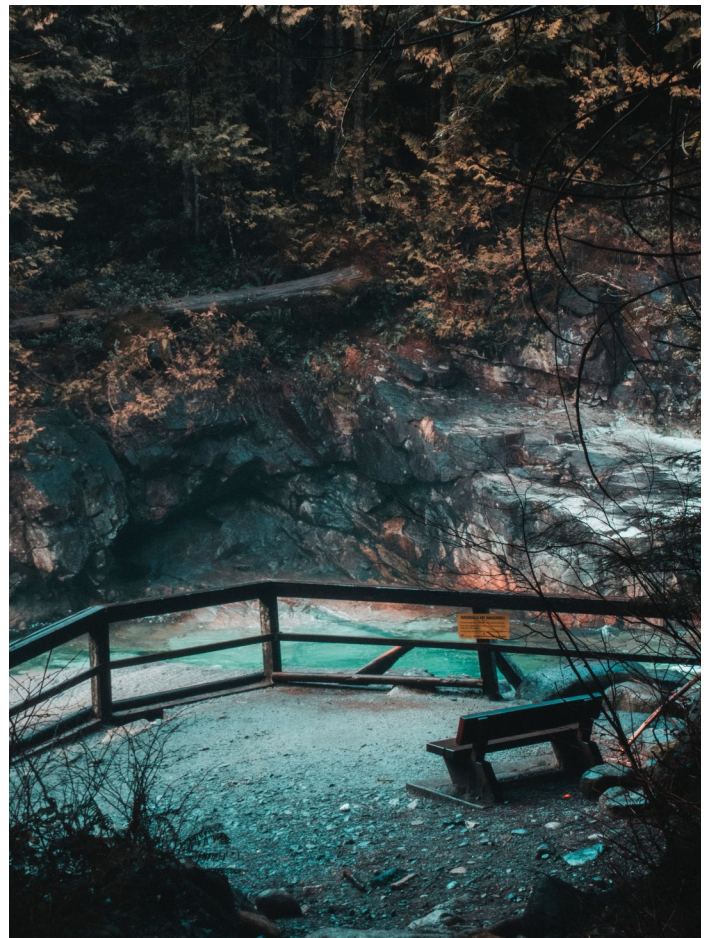
After a conversation, in chaplain training, we’re allowed and encouraged to take the time to reflect:

- What went well in that conversation?
- Where did it go off the rails?
- Did I practice compassion throughout this difficult conversation, or did I run out?
- Where did I run out?
- Did I really grasp what they were telling me?
- Was there a part they had to repeat because I didn’t get it the first time?
- Did we get where they needed to go?
- How did they pick up all the pieces of this conversation and put them back together?

Thank you for allowing me to share some of my learning - I hope this sparks some curiosity in your own listening practice!

I’ll close with a blessing for listening:

*May we always be open, may we always be learning, may we go together where it’s scary to go alone.*



## November's Theme is Healing

By Rebecca Kelley-Morgan, Director of Lifespan Religious Education

Many years ago I helped organize a summer retreat. One of the attendees was dying of late stage cancer. She was so ill that the retreat organizers were afraid she would die that week. Some might call her brave - she fought her death until the very last moment, mere hours after the retreat ended, but in a rare moment of candor between us she admitted absolute terror of death and would endure anything to avoid it. For me, the greater tragedy of her death came in not allowing herself the gift of saying goodbye and in her denial, leaving things unsaid and unfinished as she died, and bequeathing her loved ones a legacy of pain and the hard emotional work to resolve it.

I'm sure by now you are wondering why I begin a reflection on healing with a story about death. I write this for those of us who are often so sure that we know what physical and emotional healing looks like. The treatment, the therapies, the reconciliations. Those are a part of a healing journey and many of us have embarked upon them in our time. Although we believe that medicine can "heal" we look for cures, not always for healing. I come from a family of medical professionals and I rarely hear them use the word, healing, preferring "successful treatment", or "cure".

But at some time, we are all confronted by that impossible horrible reality that there is no more to be done. No further treatment that will do anything but prolong pain, no possible reconciliation with those who are abusive. I am so often tempted to say - "sometimes healing, means we stop trying to heal". My friend, described above, pursued a fruitless search for a cure well past the time when that was possible. I believe miracles do happen. They do. And more often than we think. But sometimes physical healing means healing into death. Sometimes it means we just stop trying to avoid or escape the inevitable. And sometimes emotional healing means we move forward with the understanding that we will carry scars that can't be erased. Sometimes it means we stop trying to fix broken relation-

ships. When we surrender to what is, we have made a healing choice.



I began by describing individual healing, but healing is also collective. In my decade or so of interim ministry, communities sought to heal and move forward. I would ask them, "What healing do you seek?" What healing might be possible?" and "What is your role in that healing?" As I have learned over and over again, we cannot heal if we continue to stay in the moment of our greatest pain or anger. We heal when we move forward not "in spite of" but with the knowledge of pain and anger, understanding that it may be present, but it does not have to control us. When moving on, moving past is not possible, we can always move forward. Today, as a pandemic stalks the land, and our nation's original sin of racism bears fearsome fruit, the second and third questions do not evoke immediate answers. What healing is possible when there is a politicized response to a public health issue? What healing is possible when there is limited treatment and no prophylactic or vaccine for the Novel Coronavirus? What healing is possible when Black men continue to be murdered and civil unrest teeters on the edge of a defacto civil war? How do we move forward with 400 hundred years of institutional "othering" scarring fellow citizens? How do we move forward with defensiveness and rhetoric spewing forth from left and right further entrenching positional thought and behavior? My answer is..."I don't know".

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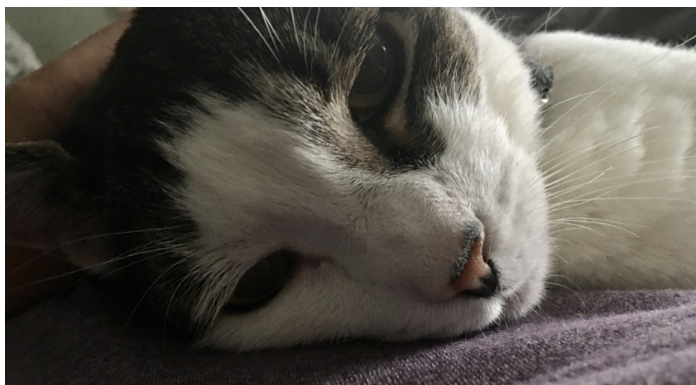
And I ask this “As people of faith, what is our role in this healing?” I think of Mohandas Gandhi who ordered a stop to the national non-cooperation movement, when violence broke out between demonstrators. Prejudice, power, fear and escalation between demonstrators and police led to deaths on both sides. (Sound familiar?) Gandhi put his faith behind his words, praying and fasting “unto death” until the violence ceased. Perhaps our role in healing is to just stop. Not all Unitarian Universalists will turn to prayer and fasting, but we can call a halt to polemic or take a break from intellectualizing the systems that have worked for us, at the expense of others and just sit in the moment, before explaining, fixing or “healing” it.

Healing is not a moment in time, we don't have to rush if what we're doing is not working. The non-cooperation movement lasted for decades before the British left India, and was not without its own birth pangs, particularly around partition. Healing is not “done” even when we get better or die, because neither of those outcomes exists in a vacuum. Healing is not done when we legislate a new law, or set of plans for reparations because our social fabric is rent and tattered from all that has come before. Healing is messy and miraculous, sometimes exacting a high price. Healing is the complex dance of surrender and hope, of attention (and yes, prayer), action and stillness. Do I know what my role is? No. I do not. Do I know what our role is? No, I do not. But I can tell you this, we have a role in collective healing and I trust that we will learn what that role is, I believe miracles do happen. They do.

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do not kid myself by thinking that she came over to console. But our brief exchange – her soft coat and deep purr, the obvious trust she had in me by lying on my chest – changed me, shifted my mood enough so I could see beyond my emotional tunnel vision. The storm outside, like the internal storm, eventually passed.

I told a bit of this story on a Facebook group I belong to, Clergy with Cats (not to be confused with



another, bona fide Facebook group, “Cats with Episcopal Problems.”) The group is simply an on-line space for interfaith discussion about life with our cats. Photos are expected. Along with sharing my experience of “feline chaplaincy,” I posted this photo of Sheina from this moment.

I was unprepared for the response. Hundreds contributed to the thread, many offering their care and concern for my heavy heart and sharing my appreciation for feline companionship.

From a brief moment of intimacy with my pet, I felt renewed. Receiving the care and prayers of strangers, I felt renewed. Connection seems to be a magic medium of renewal for me.

An elder colleague once challenged a gathering of ministers, saying “petting your cat is not a spiritual practice.” I agree. But perhaps making time for petting your cat is, especially when life within or beyond our homes is hard.

You may have other ways to renew your spirit. My hope – nay, my assignment – is that you make time and provide opportunities for this renewal. And, if how you renew your heart, mind and spirit violates current CDC guidelines, you are thus charged to discover or rediscover new ways.

Self-care does not just look like using hand sanitizer and wearing masks. It is living your life in such a way that you have the energy and resilience to maintain a strong immunity and not just survive but thrive in pandemic time. I believe this is possible for us all.

*Mary Oliver for  
Corona Times*

(Thoughts after the poem *Wild Geese*)

*by Adrie Kusserow*

You do not have to become totally zen,  
You do not have to use this isolation to make your  
marriage better,  
your body slimmer, your children more creative.  
You do not have to “maximize its benefits”  
By using this time to work even more,  
write the bestselling Corona Diaries,  
Or preach the gospel of ZOOM.  
You only have to let the soft animal of your body  
unlearn  
everything capitalism has taught you,  
(That you are nothing if not productive,  
That consumption equals happiness,  
That the most important unit is the single self.  
That you are at your best when you resemble an  
efficient machine).  
Tell me about your fictions, the ones you’ve been  
sold,  
the ones you sheepishly sell others,  
and I will tell you mine.  
Meanwhile the world as we know it is crumbling.  
Meanwhile the virus is moving over the hills,  
suburbs, cities, farms and trailer parks.  
Meanwhile The News barks at you, harsh and ad-  
dicting,  
Until the push of the remote leaves a dead quiet be-  
hind,

a loneliness that hums as the heart anchors.  
Meanwhile a new paradigm is composing itself in  
our minds,  
Could birth at any moment if we clear some space  
From the same tired hegemonies.  
Remember, you are allowed to be still as the white  
birch,  
Stunned by what you see,  
Uselessly shedding your coils of paper skins  
Because it gives you something to do.  
Meanwhile, on top of everything else you are facing,  
Do not let capitalism coopt this moment,  
laying its whistles and train tracks across your weary  
heart.  
Even if your life looks nothing like the Sabbath,  
Your stress boa-constricting your chest.  
Know that your ancy kids, your terror, your shifting  
moods,  
Your need for a drink have every right to be here,  
And are no less sacred than a yoga class.  
Whoever you are, no matter how broken,  
the world still has a place for you, calls to you over  
and over  
announcing your place as legit, as forgiven,  
even if you fail and fail and fail again.  
remind yourself over and over,  
all the swells and storms that run through your long  
tired body  
all have their place here, now in this world.  
It is your birthright to be held  
deeply, warmly in the family of things,  
not one cell left in the cold.

## A Summer of Spiritual Diversity

One gift of the Winchester Unitarian Society is the spiritual diversity among its members. This Summer, among the members leading worship services were Peter McEntee and Ivan Correia. Here are some excerpts from their engaging sermons, revealing some of our differing but compelling religious perspectives.



*From "Religion and Evolution, or Evolution of Religion"*

*By Peter McEntee*

"...[E]volution is a very slow process. Change occurs over time, but is undetectable in the close-up view. Another point...evolution is not a matter of design, but an oppor-

tunistic process. Living things evolve, but Evolution has no idea where it's headed, and has no particular desire to arrive at some ultimate goal. Living things simply try to survive. Finally, it's clear that the features of living things that are subject to evolution often end up serving quite different purposes than they originally did. For instance, we know that some ancient fishes acquired the ability to breathe air and subsequently began spending more and more time on land, and over generations their fins became more like legs and increasingly less useful for swimming. So, at what point is a semi-aquatic creature with fin-like limbs no longer a fish, but something else?...

[Author] Richard Dawkins seems to regard the essential feature that defines a cultural entity as a religion to be the belief in a supernatural deity. But must that be? There certainly are some religions, such as Buddhism, where belief in a god or gods is peripheral or non-existent. Some UUs believe in something

they call God, but many don't, myself included. For Dawkins, religion means a belief in God, and, he maintains, since belief in God is false, and potentially harmful to humans, we would do well to just get rid of religion. But why must religion be about believing in God or not believing?

...Could theism in religions, like a vestigial organ, fade in importance over time? I don't think we'll be around long enough to find out. Like all evolving creatures, I can't see that far ahead... Let the larger selection forces do what they will. In the meantime, this atheist plans to keep coming to church."



*From "The 'Sweet Spot' in a Spiritual Community"*

*By Ivan Correia*

"At the beginning of the summer we are asked to identify key words to describe our sermon. As a tennis fan I chose "finding that sweet spot". For all you sport buffs

you know what I am talking about. This is that perfect zone on your racket where the impact is absorbed, and you return the ball with maximum output and minimal effort. Pushing that analogy, a little further I ask the question "so, what is the sweet spot of a spiritual community"? Think about a community where the unexpected curve balls that life throws at you are absorbed and we emerge as better individuals; comforted, inspired and ready to move on. Borrowing from traditional Christian Teachings this is a community that is blessed with grace and with gifts of the spirit (faith, knowledge, healing, wisdom, discernment).

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Reverend Margaret Beckham, a Unitarian minister, expresses it (Grace) best for me. She preaches that Grace strikes us when we are in great pain and going through a period of tremendous uncertainty. A wave of light breaks into our darkness. Reverend Beckham goes on to say “There’s no amount of good deeds we can do, and there’s no magic prayer we can pray, that will guarantee we receive grace. We receive grace, not because we deserve it, but because the universe is fundamentally a generous place. We are created in God’s image. If it’s the nature of God to give grace, then it’s our nature, too. We are most like God when we are being graceful to one another, when we make room for the presence of another, whatever the consequences”. This community (the WUS) is blessed with grace which is reflected in the many ways we reach out to those in need and to those that are disadvantaged. Most recently as we respond to the shooting of another unarmed black man in Kenosha. Given the overwhelming and disproportionate injustice suffered by Americans of color we speak up and affirm that Black Lives Matter too.”

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