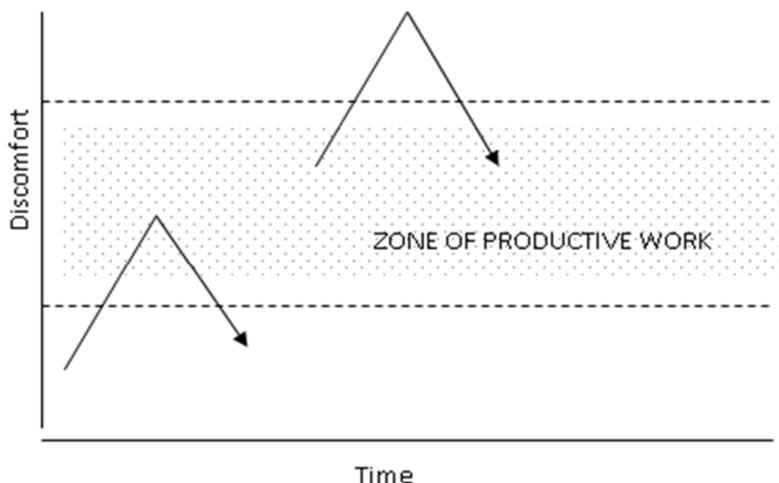


## *To Comfort the Afflicted, and Afflict the Comfortable*

Bellingham Unitarian Fellowship

April 2, 2017

Rev. Paul Beckel



### **INTRODUCTION**

Somewhere on the scale of energy — or stimulation — between inertia and chaos, there is a lovely fluid zone of healthy functioning: growing, being and becoming our best selves. In our families, and workplaces, and congregations, and certainly within our own souls, it's important to be able to recognize where we are in this scale at any given moment. Down here, complacent, inert? Up there, frazzled, overwhelmed? Or somewhere in between, not at some eternal point of equilibrium, but within a dynamic range, responding to the joys and the challenges before us.

It's important to be mindful of where we are. It's important to recognize that we often have a choice in where we're going to put ourselves along that continuum. And even in the face of circumstances that we haven't chosen, we have the ability to raise or to lower the temperature, the pressure, to help ourselves — and to help the groups with whom we collaborate — to *stay* in the zone when we are there ... and to gently return ourselves to the zone when fear causes us to freeze, or to freak out.

### **GATHERING SONG**

#1050 Jazz Alleluia

### **RE MINUTE / CHILDREN'S FOCUS**

[I used balloons to demonstrate: with no pressure in our lives, we aren't able to do/be our best; same with too much pressure.]

### **NEW MEMBER WELCOMING**

We joyfully welcomed 8 new members to BUF

### **ERACISM MINUTE**

Rod Haynes

### **MEDITATION**

*When we honestly ask ourselves which people in our lives mean the most to us we often find that it is those who instead of giving much advice, solutions, cures; have chosen rather to share our pain and touch our wounds with a gentle and tender hand.*

*The friend who can be silent with us in a moment of despair or confusion, who can stay with us in an hour of grief and bereavement, who can tolerate not knowing, not curing, not healing and face with us the reality of our own powerlessness, that is the friend who cares.*

--Henri Nouwen

Reflection Question: How comfortable am I in being that friend who can be silent with another in the midst of their anguish and pain?

## **SPECIAL MUSIC**

*When You Say Nothing at All*, by Alison Kraus

## **MESSAGE**

[If you're reading this, stop. Go to youtube and listen to *When You Say Nothing at All*, really.]

You say it best when you say nothing at all. This approach works best for people who know each other *so well* that they don't always *need* to *blab* about the details.

It also works well with two people, or with a group, when there isn't anything hanging in the air unsaid, or unsayable.

I have shared tender and beautiful moments of silence with both individuals and groups at BUF. But if that's what you're looking for today in worship, the Bellingham Quakers meet downtown. They start at 10 a.m. tho, so they might be back into chatty mode by now.

You know I love the Quakers, right? You gotta respect people who know when to keep their mouths shut ... and don't spout off when they have nothing to say that's true, and kind, and necessary, or at least two out of the three.

So, there are many situations in which it is better to say nothing at all. And I am tempted to try that some Sunday morning. But today, even though this feels risky, I'd like to share with you what is on my heart.

Is it pathetic that I would feel uneasy sharing with my congregation what's on my heart? It's not that I don't trust you. But it's never been easy for me to talk about my own feelings. Maybe it's a guy thing, compounded by Midwestern stoicism. But it's also a part of my religious identity — as Unitarians have a centuries-old reputation for intellectualizing religion.

And beyond gender and personality, there's also the matter of the ministerial role. Now this can be overdone, but there are some real benefits for congregations when their minister doesn't make everything about herself or himself ... and instead simply fulfills the ministerial role, maintaining professional boundaries rather than getting overly personal. And in that role, I am supposed to be here for you, not the other way around. And that's a role in which I'm very comfortable.

Not that comfort is the ultimate goal in life — not for me, and not for Unitarian Universalism. And thus the title of today's sermon, "Comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable," which is an old trope about the

role of ministry. And ministry, as I use the word today, is everything that we do — each of us, and all of us together — to fulfill the covenant that we shared a few minutes ago.

My plan today *was* to give a good old fashioned rationalist Unitarian analysis of the *theory* behind comforting the afflicted and afflicting the comfortable. But a ministerial colleague of mine, who I really trust, asked me this week how I was feeling. And when I told him, he asked further: what would happen if you told that to your congregation?

Well, I said, tell them how I'm feeling?

That would make me feel vulnerable.

...Besides, why ratchet up the anxiety of the whole congregation? We already have enough of that.

But then I thought about what our Stewardship committee has been doing in regard to our projected budget shortfall. They're taking the approach that it's a sign of respect to just tell the simple truth, treat people like adults.

Besides, we're connected. So to some degree, if we're paying attention, I'm going to know how you're feeling, and you're going to know how I'm feeling. So it's not always appropriate to share the details, but there are times that silence can make bad feelings worse, or let good feelings go to waste.

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Last weekend I attended an installation ceremony for my new colleagues, a ministerial couple now serving the Northshore UU congregation in Vancouver BC. Well, I kind of attended. I stayed here in the office too long, then had a very long wait at the border, then ran into awful Vancouver traffic, and I arrived half an hour after the service started. Which wasn't that big of a deal. I didn't get to be part of the pomp of processing into the service in my robe with all of my colleagues. But sneaking in late and sitting inconspicuously in the back felt kind of nice. Going from such an elevated state of hurry and worry that I might have gotten into an accident, to that safe spot with my back against the wall, where I could stretch out my legs, and be an observer rather than an observee.

Then it came to the point in the service for the charge to the new ministers. And my colleague, Rev. Stephen Epperson, who you may remember preached here a few months ago, Stephen began by stating gravely to the young ministerial couple, who just had their first child, he said: "my charge to you, first of all is to nurture and prioritize *your own* relationship and your relationship with this child. Only if you do this first will you be of any use to this congregation."

And I started crying, not quite bawling, but a lot more than tearing-up. I remembered when I was in seminary and my son Rick was an infant... and reading a biography of Rev. John Haynes Holmes, a remarkable Unitarian minister who in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century served a big congregation in New York City. Along the way he wrote books, and was a co-founder of both the ACLU and the NAACP. As a public figure and a pacifist through two world wars, Holmes stood up to enormous pressure including pressure from former U.S. President William Howard Taft who by that time had become a Unitarian denominational lay leader. I remember being impressed by his endurance and accomplishments. And I vividly remember an excerpt from his diary toward the end of his life, in which he stated his deep regret that his career had kept him from having a meaningful relationship with either his wife or his kids.

I'm not sure if it was the memory of Holmes, and my colleague's admonition to the young ministerial couple that made me cry. Because I'm confident that I've done well as a partner and as a parent. Maybe it was just a reminder that both my family and my ministry have been deeply important to me over the past 20 years —

and have at times held one another in tension. Or maybe it was just a release from the pent-up weariness of a difficult week, teaming up with staff with more *must-do* projects than time would allow, learning about BUF's enormous projected budget deficit, telling staff about the projected deficit, learning that a family member had gotten a cancer diagnosis, trying to support a child who had just moved to the big city far from home without job or car or family or place to live....

And one more thing (you don't need to know any of this stuff, but isn't this what makes novels and movies relevant and real – the petty details that can drive someone over the edge?) so the one more thing is that Jane and I have been planning a kitchen remodel — dragging on now for over a year — and the day before my crying jag we heard from the contractor that there was another \$10,000 to be added for some unforeseen structural work, oh and by the way you probably have asbestos.

So a little cry kinda makes sense. And I probably would have forgotten about it by now, except that ten minutes later, to conclude the service we sang “The Fire of Commitment.” Well, they sang; I found myself convulsing in sobs, trying my damndest not to make noise or be noticed. And after about five or ten minutes of that I finally had to sneak out a back door and skip the reception where I would have been able to talk to my colleagues.

This was very unusual for me, and even more unusual that I'm telling you about it. It feels very presumptuous to share this kind of stuff. But a few weeks ago we had a Sunday service that was largely a memorial service for our long time beloved member of the congregation, Kay Witter. It was beautiful and emotionally intense. And I spoke afterward with someone who was here for the first time. I asked: was that too weird? And she answered, and I believed her, that even though this wasn't what she expected, and even though she obviously didn't know Kay, that it had been a rich experience for her, and a good introduction to what she hoped that this congregation could be about.

And I've gone off on a tangent now but I'm going to keep going, because Kay's service was very powerful for me personally. I was less in my head that day. And I felt very connected to you. Then the next Sunday I preached on the theme, “Love is the spirit of this fellowship.” And people told me afterward that it was like I was on fire. The whole sermon had simply been a weaving together of excerpts from conversations with a couple dozen of you in which I asked this question: “At the beginning of every Sunday service we say love is the spirit of this fellowship.... So what do those words mean to you?” And that Sunday morning I was just so excited to share the responses with you. I knew you'd love it. And you did. And I felt so very close to you. In fact this whole year of Sundays has been pretty remarkable from my end.

We started the year with some tears as we faced the impossible truth that Martin Luther King Jr spoke when he said that we cannot wait any longer for racial and economic justice ... this alongside the unbearable truth that it was 50 years ago when he said we cannot wait.

Then a couple of months ago I scrapped my intended sermon topic and went on a screeching rant about the inconceivable absurdity we now face with science and history and journalism and truth itself being put through the meat grinder. And so many standards of constitutional law and ethics and international diplomacy and American ideals and even math have been completely turned on their heads. That rant was cathartic for me, and I think for you too. It didn't solve anything, but maybe it took our collective anxiety down just enough to keep us from exploding. And there's some value in that.

So why, though, why did that particular song get to me: “The Fire of Commitment”? I'm going to jump ahead now, to something that I didn't know at the time. I just learned about this this past Thursday night, but

I tie it back to the previous weekend because the situation is emblematic for me of struggles we've experienced for decades within the Unitarian Universalist Association.

This week Rev. Peter Morales, President of the UUA, resigned, with just 3 months left in his second four-year term — stating his belief that he was no longer in a position to lead the organization. Throughout the week Morales had been criticized from all corners for a recent hire of a white male to replace another white male in a high profile leadership position, while an equally qualified female person of color, the other final candidate for the job, was told that she wasn't quite the right fit for the team.

There are all sorts of things to be distressed about in this situation. The rhetoric has been intense with critics from within calling us a white supremacist organization. And Morales responding with insufficient grace. But behind all the words there is a painful reality we need to face. The problem isn't this one hire. The problem is that though we have been prophesying about racial justice and diversifying the UU movement for decades, we still have only two of our top executive staff of the UUA who are people of color — one of whom is the Director of Diversity and the other was Morales himself. Also, the leaders of our five UUA regions around the country: all five are white. And there are plenty of people of color in senior *volunteer* positions in the UUA, but not as paid staff. Only in unskilled service position do we have a significant number of people of color.

Now my first reaction to this, I'll admit, was to think, "this is not who we want to be... but ... let's try to stay within the productive zone between complacency and crisis. Clearly we do not want to remain complacent, but it won't be helpful if we start tearing each other apart."

As a white male, I am aware of my white privilege, but I get defensive when the organization I support and the people I know who are doing their best to interrupt a legacy of discrimination are called white supremacists. I struggle with the irony that the person of color at the top of our organization had to take the fall for being unable to transform a system created by the dominant culture.

A person of color, on the other hand, may very reasonably say: you call this a crisis? You can't take the pressure? Are you kidding me? We eat and breathe this crap. You say we're raising the heat too high? Maybe it is finally getting hot enough for you to get up off your ass.

Throughout my years as a Unitarian Universalist, I have seen our 1,000+ congregations doing life-transforming work. I have heard this statement from many people: Unitarian Universalism saved my life. Each of them probably meant something a little different, but I understand, because I feel this way too.

And yet, our movement as a whole really struggles to implement its dreams. We're just not very good institutionalists, probably because we have been, for most of our history, an anti-institutional people.

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I didn't know about all of this recent stuff when I heard "The Fire of Commitment," and got all bent out of shape. But I've been reminded many times that well-intended UUs and UU leaders and UU organizations can get caught in destabilizing spirals. And despite our ideals and our commitments, we turn on ourselves with the energy we'd like to put to use beyond these walls.

But it's a tricky business. Because it's not just a matter of figuring out when to comfort and when to afflict, which is hard enough. But what we really need to do is to expand the zone within which we can effectively function. Because sometimes we find that one little inconvenient truth can make us so agitated that we shoot from complacent straight to aggrieved...and if we get one little reassurance that we're loved just the way we

are ... we can plummet from aggrieved right back down to complacent, without managing to spend a moment in the zone where we might learn or accomplish something.

It's like we aspire to serve as a refreshing drink of water to the world, but our only states of being are being locked up as ice, or evaporated into space. Only able to act out our lizard legacy of flight or freeze.

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Good ministry may involve comforting the afflicted and afflicting the comfortable. But I wonder if a more general expectation of a UU minister is to be cheerful — except when we're being profound ... and in the end, always, to convey reassurance that things are going to turn out ok.

Well, I like to be sunny. I like to be reassuring. But I am also profoundly scared. Because even if I were to pretend that racism and sexism have no impact on me as a white male, still, the ongoing escalation of economic inequality, the endless growth of militarism, the incremental effects of climate change, and the invisible eviscerations of truth and democracy, these will all be consequential for me and my children.

Maybe it's about time that middle class white males get a feel for scared. Maybe that's what we'll need to truly commit to systemic change.

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I'm not always cheerful, but I do love Sunday mornings. During the week, reading and writing gobs of emails — this is not particularly exciting. And I can be a little cranky each week until I figure out what's going to be special that I can share with you on Sunday. But once I sense that spark, I get excited to share it with you. And I'm glad to greet you at the door because I know there will be something for you that will be fun or touching or beautiful or socially relevant or intellectually stimulating. Today I anticipated your joy in welcoming and getting to know a bunch of new members, and I knew that that song by Tessie and Andrea would break your hearts — in a good way.

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I am very proud of what Unitarianism and Universalism have meant for the world and for individuals over the past 200 years. And I have high hopes for what we can become. And I worry about the incredibly complex challenges we face. I worry that our frustration with not living up to all of our ideals will create internal divisions and cause us to start over again and again. But I'm also proud that we do start over, again and again. Generation after generation.

So to you new members: we're glad to have you today, but please understand that you'll really become a member when you stick around even when things stink. Through the current UUA debacle and the next one. Through this canvass, and the next one. Through interpersonal disappointments, and ministerial obtuseness.

And why might you hold on to the ideals of our covenant even when we don't always practice what we preach? Each of you will have your own reasons. Among those reasons, I hope, will be this: that when things fall apart, you will discover new opportunities for growth. And even where the system is broken you'll see something shining through the cracks.

And as you begin to piece the world back together, your loyalty will have grown fierce. Because you have made it your own.

## **SHARING OUR GIFTS**

### **SENDING SONG**

*#121 We'll Build a Land*

### **CIRCLE 'ROUND**