

## What is pastoral care?<sup>1</sup>

Rev. Myke Johnson

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Allen Avenue Unitarian Universalist Church

### Readings

#### Listening

Margaret Wheatley<sup>2</sup>

Real healing is available when we listen to each other. Listening is such a simple act. It requires us to be present, and that takes practice, but we don't have to do anything else. We don't have to advise, or coach, or sound wise. We just have to be willing to sit there and listen. If we can do that, we create moments in which real healing is available. Whatever life we have experienced, if we can tell our story to someone who listens, we find it easier to deal with our circumstances.

#### Invisible Work (Excerpts)

Alison Luterman<sup>3</sup>

...thought of the invisible work that stitches up the world day and night,  
the slow, unglamorous work of healing,  
...The work  
of my heart  
is the work of the world's heart.  
There is no other art.

### Sermon

What is pastoral care? Pastoral care refers to the caring and support we give to people during a time of difficulty in their lives. Its roots are in the Latin word for shepherd: pastor. Both the Jewish and Christian scriptures use the shepherd as a metaphor for one who nurtures and cares for the people. In our congregation, we see pastoral care as the caring and support that our congregation gives to our members, especially during a time of difficulty.

Every person will face some difficulty during life. Every person will have some troubles. We might get sick, or need surgery. We might experience the illness or death of a loved one. We might lose a job, or face the ending of a relationship. Our congregation can't prevent difficulties for those in our midst, but we can offer care and support during such times.

The theologian Paul Tillich said "The first duty of love is to listen." At its most basic, pastoral care means compassionate listening. When we are facing troubles, it can help to speak about it to another person who listens with kindness. In fact, when we experience a great joy, it also deepens our joy to be able to share it.

I'd like to take a few moments for all of us to reflect on the role of listening in our own lives. If you are comfortable, close your eyes, and let your breathing be slow and deep. Let us take three deep breaths together.

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2 *Turning to One Another: Simple Conversations to Restore Hope to the Future*, 2002

3 From *The Largest Possible Life*

Now, let yourself go back to a time in your life when someone truly listened to you. Take a moment to remember a particular person or situation of deep listening. Imagine the face of the person who was listening. Notice how they were attentive in their posture or the expression on their face. Remember how they spoke or kept silent. Remember what it felt like...

Now, gently let go of that image, and go back to another time, when you truly listened to someone else. Imagine the face of the person who was speaking. Notice how your listening affected this person. Remember how it felt to you to pay attention in this way.

Now, gently let go of that image, and when you are ready, open your eyes.

Listening is an act of love. The first person who really listened to me was my mom. Everyday I came home from school and told her my stories of what had happened that day. Sometimes they were happy stories, sometimes they were sad stories, but she was there to give that attention. She was the one with whom I could cry or talk about my fears. I can't remember how it started. Did she ask me, from the beginning, what my days were like? Right after I started going off to school? Or was the need to tell everything already inside of me, and she responded by listening. I can't remember. But it seems a part of my nature now that something isn't quite real until I have had a chance to share it with another. Sandra Benitez writes, "It is stories that save us."<sup>4</sup>

When we can speak about what has happened in our lives, we weave the stories of joy and sorrow into the patchwork quilt of all that it means to be human. We might even say that the events of our lives need to happen more than once—there is the actual event, and then there is the story of the event.

Since listening is so important, how do we learn to be good listeners? This weekend we have been doing a program at our church called LAMP 101. LAMP is our acronym for Leadership and Ministry Program, and this is our basic training in the skills of shared ministry. The first part of this program is about the practice of compassionate listening.

Sometimes it can be useful to look at what is not so helpful for compassionate listening. When we listen to someone, we always respond in some way. Some responses help the person to feel heard and understood. Other responses discourage deep sharing. So yesterday we started by looking at some specific unhelpful listening responses. It is not that these responses are always wrong—there are conversations when they may be totally appropriate. But these responses discourage the sharing of feelings that can be helpful when someone is going through a hard time.

One example is advice-giving. I am sure we have all done it. Someone says to us: "I feel sad today." And we say, "You should take a walk. That always helps." Maybe taking a walk does help us, but right then, we missed an opportunity for another thing that can help—listening. This response is related to another unhelpful response, trying to fix whatever the person has just shared. Many of us have been taught that good people fix problems; but what is more helpful is when we offer enough

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4 In the novel, *A Place Where the Sea Remembers*, (Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 1993) p. 103.

listening space for a person to come up with their own solutions to a situation.

Other less helpful responses are expressing our opinions about their situation, or analyzing it. For example, someone says to us, “I feel upset.” And we say, “Maybe you are watching too many sad movies,” or “Do you think you might be clinically depressed? I know a good psychologist you could see.” It doesn't matter if our analysis or opinion is right or wrong. What matters is that those answers close off the conversation, rather than make a space for the person to share more deeply.

Do you see where I am going with this? To be a good compassionate listener, we want to make space for the person to be able to share what is in their heart. Our hearts have a wisdom that is very canny. We pick up when it is safe to be vulnerable and when it is not. If someone is quick to give advice, or if they try to fix us, our hearts are likely to close the door and shut off the conversation. We also don't feel safe if someone expresses judgement about our feelings, or quickly changes the subject, or we learn that they have been gossiping about confidences shared at other times.

On the other side, what are some helpful listening responses? We can start by our non-verbal language. We face the person, in a relaxed way, make eye contact, and perhaps lean slightly toward them. This non-verbal language shows we are paying attention. And then, we just listen. Ninety percent of the time, we don't have to say anything. Maybe we nod, or say “hm-hm.” Every so often, we might repeat or restate what the person has said. If someone says, “I feel upset,” we might just say, “You're upset.” And then wait. Every so often, we might ask a clarifying question. “What's going on for you?” And every so often, we might affirm what they are sharing in some way. “With everything that is going on for you, no wonder you feel upset!”

It sounds simple, but it can be challenging to sit with someone in the midst of their difficult feelings, and not give in to the temptation to fix things or give advice or divert or analyze. Our own anxieties can get stirred up. We might imagine that helping means to solve it in some way. Or we might be distracted by our own feelings of distress. Listening is simple in some ways, but it is challenging in other ways. I think the first step in learning to be good listeners is to realize that we don't have to fix anyone or solve anything—that it is okay to just be a good listener. That is the best gift we can offer.

Part of my pastoral role as your minister is to listen to church members who are experiencing a crisis. When someone is in distress, what helps me remember that I don't have to fix or solve their troubles is our first UU principle—the inherent worth and dignity of each person. We believe that each person has a spark of the sacred within them. We honor that each person has a deep wisdom and expertise on their own life. This is their spiritual journey they are living, not ours. By our compassionate and respectful listening, we make room for them to discover their own wisdom and strength.

Of course there are occasional exceptions to this rule. There are moments when someone is in enough distress that outside help is needed; for example, if someone is being a danger to themselves or someone else. There are times in our lives when we need more care and guidance. Children need some boundaries as they are growing into their own wisdom, and some of our elders as they age lose their ability to make good judgments. But even children and frail elders and distraught people benefit from compassionate listening. Compassionate listening is how we express care and love, and everyone needs love.

As a congregation, we offer many opportunities for compassionate listening. For example, we have a time for *joys and concerns* during our worship service, so people have a chance to name the sorrows and joys of their heart, by speaking or by writing, to be heard in the circle of community. Following the service, I often notice conversations going on around the room, with a deeper sharing that continues through the invitation of caring listeners. Everyone is a part of our pastoral care when you offer that kind listening ear.

We also have more structured programs for pastoral care. One of our newer members asked me about the *Pastoral Care Team*, and who they are and what they do. Our Pastoral Care Team is a group of church members who have some training or experience in compassionate listening, and are available to listen to other members who are experiencing illness, bereavement, or other stressful challenges. When you share a joy or concern on Sunday, one of the Pastoral Care Team members will give you a call, or send an email to check in to see if you'd like to talk further. They also respond to emails sent to [care@a2u2.org](mailto:care@a2u2.org), and check phone messages when I am away on vacation in the summer. The current active members of the Team are listed in your program.

Another part of our pastoral care at Allen Avenue is the *Caring Connection*. Sometimes people ask, what is the difference between the Pastoral Care Team and the Caring Connection? Both groups are a part of the nurture and support of our members, but the Caring Connection is the group that coordinates practical help to members during times of need. Some examples include bringing meals when someone comes home from the hospital, or arranging a ride for someone. They send cards to elders, and coordinate and serve a reception after a Memorial Service. The group doesn't do all of this on their own—many other members have volunteered to be part of a response email list, and when a need comes up, a request is sent out to the list, and people respond as they are able.

Both of these groups are watching out for the more vulnerable members of our congregation—especially those with long-term illness, or elders who are not so able to be as active as they once were. We also have individuals serving as *Pastoral Visitors*. A pastoral visitor is a volunteer who is matched with one elder: they make a commitment to visit that person at least once a month, so they can remain connected to our community. Many Pastoral Visitors are also members of the Caring Connection or Pastoral Care Team.

We have a new ministry this year that is now a part of our pastoral care. The *Shawl Ministry* is a group who love to knit, and have chosen a special way to share this gift with the community. They create shawls in a mindful way to be given to members in a time of illness or other such need. The shawls become a tangible reminder of the care and love of our congregation.

More of our pastoral ministry happens through the group *Member Connections*. Often, newcomers come to church during a time of transition or struggle in their lives. The decision to become part of a church can be a profound moment in someone's spiritual journey. Member Connections, along with our Membership Coordinator Laura Burden, help folks make connections at church that have meaning for them. The goal is to help new members feel more at home, and link them up to activities that match their interests, and integrate them into our church community. An important part of this process is offering a listening ear to our new members.

There is so much pastoral ministry that happens in so many ways at our congregation. As in the poem by Alison Luterman today, much of it is unseen. It is “the invisible work that stitches up the world day

and night, the slow, unglamorous work of healing...” If anyone would like to be more involved in one of our programs for pastoral care, just contact the people listed in your program, or give me a call, and your presence will be greatly appreciated. I have named several programs that are set up to be involved in this invisible work, but I want to call attention to another one.

Our *Spiritual Enrichment Groups* are a form of compassionate listening in small groups. Those of you who have participated in one will be able to bear witness to this. The structure is simple. A group of eight to ten people meets regularly, usually twice a month for two hours. Each person around the circle has time for a long check in, a chance to speak from the heart and be heard by others about the joys and sorrows in their life. Then the group has a time to discuss topics that are of importance to members, chosen by the group. The group doesn't try to solve problems or argue points of theory—rather, they offer enough listening space so that the deeper wisdom of each person can rise to the surface of their consciousness and be spoken. Over time, the bonds in the group grow deeper. When group members face a difficulty in their lives, their SEG mates step in to offer support and practical help and caring.

The idea of group check-ins has migrated to many group meetings in our church. I would venture to guess that most committees and task forces begin their meetings with time for brief joys and sorrows around the circle. Religious Education classes do it, the Board of Trustees does it. It is part of what makes us a church, and not just a non-profit organization getting some good work done. Sometimes it may be as mundane as recounting what we did on our summer vacation. But when it is needed, there is room to name the harder stuff in our lives, and know that there will be tenderness around that circle.

As a church, we listen, and we offer compassion and connection. Sharing a sorrow can't fix it. It won't bring back someone we love, or end an illness. But listening has a certain magic power to warm our hearts, even in our sadness. I am not saying anything that you don't already know. But I have found it good to remind ourselves every so often, to remember why we are here. There are a lot of things we do at church, but perhaps this is at the core.

At Allen Avenue we are growing a community that transforms lives through the power of love. Listening is the primary way we put this into practice. You may be a part of pastoral care at A2U2, without even knowing it—every time you listen to someone who is having a hard time. And I just also want to say, it doesn't matter if you don't do it perfectly, or make mistakes—we can all become better listeners, but perfection is not what is needed. What is needed is just a willingness to pay attention.

Sometimes, listening means being there, even when there are no words to say. Even when there is no story to tell or hear. Pastoral care is sitting by the bed of someone who is slowly dying, just holding their hand and being still. Pastoral care means being willing to go into a difficult emotional territory with silent kindness in our hearts. Showing up.

I want to say thank you today to all of you who participate in pastoral care at our church, to all of you who listen, to all of you make our mission of love come alive. What could be more beautiful, or more important than this?

### *Closing Words*

German writer Herman Hesse said, “Deep within you, you know quite well there is only a single magic, a single power, a single salvation, and that is called loving.”