

# **“Caring for Each Other”**

Rev. Lynn Harrison  
First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto  
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## **Testimony: Jeanne Van Bronkhorst**

I was thirteen years old and bored, so bored, at a long weekend camping party with my parents in the back half-acre of a church member’s home.

Rose, Leslie and I decided to sneak into the house and make prank phone calls. We would randomly dial numbers and imitate a local radio station:

“This is KAYO Country Radio—what’s the phrase that pays?!” and see how long we could keep people on the line guessing.

These were the days before caller ID, re-dial, or any saving of the numbers we tried.

First, Rose giggled her way through with a guy who flirted back like he knew her in a not-quite-so-random way. Then it was my turn.

As I started to dial I heard a familiar voice in the back of my head— my conscience? An inner voice? I call it the voice of my dream friends—saying,

“You want a random number? I’ve got a random number for you.”

And I thought, “Oh no.”

I kept dialing, an eight, maybe a two, and then the phone was ringing.

“Hello? Hello? Who’s calling?” It was an old woman’s voice, soft, feathery, frail.

Oh. No. I began, “Hello! This is KAY—”

---but she talked right over me. “Oh, bless you for calling me! How did you know today is my birthday? I was so hoping someone would call today. I haven’t talked with anyone in so long. You are an angel! My son is so busy I don’t think he’s remembered...”

For a second I thought, “Is she pranking me!?”

But then I found myself falling into her story.

For the next fifteen minutes she talked about her life, her son and his work, and then the obligations of family and of love, the pain of loneliness.

She invited me into a world I had never imagined and I was...transfixed. I wondered for a minute about her safety but she said she was fine, just so lonely.

Finally, she remembered she didn’t really know me. She thanked me again for being an angel and then she asked, “why are you calling me again?”

I hesitated. “We’re calling because it’s your birthday,” I said, “and we want to wish you a very happy birthday.”

When I hung up, Rosie and Leslie had disappeared and I just sat there. I felt awed and a little lost at the brazen serendipity of it all.

Was this how angels are made—are we all nudged by some force of love into each other’s lives, one random phone call at a time?

I didn’t even know her name.

I can trace my career in mental health and hospice, as well as my church involvement today in pastoral care and the listening ministry, back to that random phone call.

I was that woman’s angel for fifteen minutes and she—she changed my life.

I wish I could thank her.

Thank you all for allowing me to inhabit this role in our congregation.

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## **Sermon: “Caring for Each Other” - Rev. Lynn Harrison**

“A different call.”

Well, that certainly was a different phone call than Jeanne expected.

And I have to tell you, her story has brought tears to my eyes ever since I first heard it, when we started to prepare this service.

In fact it was such a good story,  
I wondered if we even needed a sermon...but here I am.

In ordained ministry,  
we’re often asked to tell our “call story:”  
that is, the story of how we came to the decision  
to enter this unusual and demanding profession.

But it’s not just clergy who have “call stories.”

It’s anyone who is called by life...  
often in some completely unexpected way...

To meet a need...  
to fill a gap...  
to play a new and important role in this world.

Greta Thunberg had a call.  
Ben Robins had a call.

Every candidate in our current election had a call.

But as Jeanne made clear just now,  
often the most important calls  
are not the most public nor celebrated nor special.

They're simply the calls  
to be present to another human being,

When that presence is deeply needed.

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The Presbyterian minister Frederick Buechner once  
wrote:

“The place God calls you to  
is the place where your deep gladness  
and the world’s deep hunger meet.”

In other words, that place is an intersection  
where our unique abilities and the world’s need  
come together...  
and something new is born  
that is beneficial for all.

Jeanne writes that she can trace her career  
in mental health and hospice,  
as well as her church involvement today in pastoral  
care and the listening ministry, back to that random  
phone call.

The story was about the birth of a vocation—  
not a formal passage into ordained ministry,

but to something just as important,  
or indeed, even more so.

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Here at First Unitarian, we often talk about  
“shared ministry.”

What do we mean by that?

Well, one thing is that  
we don't see the ordained clergy—  
that is, Reverend Shawn Newton and me—  
as being solely responsible for  
the care of the congregation.

(It seems to me that any minister who  
thought they could be would not be a  
very good minister...and wouldn't last for long!)

Through many activities here at First,  
we try to deepen the whole congregation's  
capacity to care for one another.

This is an ongoing task.

Not something you “get” once and for all,  
but, rather, something that must be  
continually renewed and revitalized  
in our congregation,  
like any other.

Currently we have a Pastoral Care Team

of people who call and visit people in need of contact.

People who cannot participate fully in the life of the congregation and who need a listening ear.

Jeanne co-chairs that committee with Allan Brand.

She also is part of our Listening Ministry team of “lay pastors”—people who work with me closely to provide caring presence to people in crisis.

Mike Stroh is also part of the Listening Ministry team.

Shawn Newton and I also provide direct pastoral care to many people in our community.

Because the words “pastoral care” can be confusing to some people, you may also hear the words “spiritual care” being used to describe what we do.

If you’re interested in learning more about spiritual care, whether you’d like to become involved as a volunteer or develop your own skills in this area,

There’s a Spiritual Care Salon taking place at 6:00 p.m. on Wednesday night.

A vegetarian dinner will be provided, and we’ll discuss the topic “How to visit someone in hospital”—

Something many of us are often called to do.

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At the heart of all of these caring activities  
is the act of listening.

And as Jeanne's story demonstrates,  
the act of "caring by listening"  
goes beyond any formal role or occupation.

And it can be a gift of immeasurable value.

As James Miller writes in the book  
"The Art of Listening in a Healing Way,"

"Choosing to listen—to really listen—  
is one of the most caring, affirming gifts  
you can offer another.

By creating an open space in which the other person  
is free to express whatever matters most at the  
moment,  
you can facilitate healing and growth.

By relating to the one who's speaking as a whole  
person,  
and by bringing your whole self as a listener to this  
experience, you can be in touch with life at a very  
deep level."<sup>1</sup>

He goes on to say:

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<sup>1</sup> James E. Miller, *The Art of Listening in a Healing Way* (Willowgreen: Fort Wayne, In, 2003), back cover.



“Healing listening has to do with being rather than doing.

We listen not to help someone,  
but simply to be with someone.

To stay with them for awhile,  
perhaps to approach understanding them.

We listen not so that we can offer  
our insight or advice to another  
but so that wisdom can be explored  
and insight revealed through  
that person’s words, thoughts, and feelings.

Or not! [...]²

(And you heard that right!)

He continues:

“When we listen in [this] way, we carry no agenda  
for the other person or for ourselves.

We listen because we choose to listen, without  
knowing what will transpire, without needing to  
know.

We listening because the other person is worth  
being listened to, however little or much we know  
about them,

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<sup>2</sup> Miller, 13.

however much we're alike or unlike.

We listen because listening can put us in touch with life and with all that life both promises and delivers."<sup>3</sup>

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Now, this kind of non-judgmental listening may sound simple...and I think it is...but it's far from easy.

In our culture, many of us can be oriented toward the quick fix, the "solution" to the "problem."

Many of us may be oriented toward helping others, which may have more to do with our own unconscious drives than others' actual needs.

We also, sometimes, and without realizing it, turn the story around so it relates to us.

In doing so, we obscure the inherent worth of the other person's insight and experience...

Their inherent ability to draw on the sources of strength of *their* understanding, not ours.

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The Quaker teacher Parker Palmer has said that

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<sup>3</sup> Miller, 13-14.

“the soul is shy”...and that as listeners, our primary task is to create a safe space where the soul can be expressed and heard by the person speaking.

So, what’s the opposite of this kind of listening?

We probably all know, because we’ve all been on both ends of the line at one time or another.

“That thing that happened to you? That’s exactly what happened to me! Let me tell you how I handled it.”

“Have you tried solution a, b, c, d or e? It really worked for....this person I know.”

“I think you should (fill in the blank)” or “Why haven’t you (filled in the blank)?”

I wonder why we’re so often compelled to jump in with solutions?

Perhaps it’s because we’re uncomfortable with uncertainty, ambiguity or tension.

We often want things to resolve and find ourselves impatient to make that happen.

And of course I’m speaking of myself when I say this.

Spiritual practice,

such as mindfulness meditation,  
centering prayer,  
or any contemplative approach to life  
can help us develop our capacity  
to be with what is—exactly as it is.

When we learn to be present in stillness  
with ourselves first, we develop our ability  
to be present to others  
in an unconditionally loving way.

That is healing in itself—  
even when no “solution”  
to any “problem”  
emerges right away.

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So, thinking back to the un-helpful advice  
we’ve probably all received or given,  
how does that compare with simple silence?

(Pause)

Or, a gentle, facilitating sound  
that invites the person to reflect more deeply.

“Ah. Hmm.”

Or an open and honest question,  
that we don’t know the answer to, such as:

“What was that like?”

“How did you feel?”  
“What’s your next step?”

This kind of open and compassionate listening is,  
to me, the heart of spiritual care.

It opens up the space for something new to arise,  
in the meeting of the speaker and the listener.

That “new place” to which Life calls us.

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We are very fortunate, I think,  
to be part of a community that encourages  
caring for each other in this way.

(And I’m including everyone here,  
whether this is your first time with us,  
or whether you’re watching online.)

In our Journey Groups,  
we practice this kind of listening,  
which does not involve helping or fixing  
or giving advice.

The format we follow is based on the  
Quaker concept of the “circle of trust.”

We’ll be deepening our ability to listen this way  
in our upcoming Spiritual Care Salons...

Last year, Tracey Erin Smith also offered a  
workshop

on deep listening as well.

Earlier today, Leslie spoke about the activities going on in response to the climate crisis.

Given the depth of the problems facing the world, and the anxiety that is arising as a result, it seems to me there's an increasing call for people who are able to be present to others in this way.

To be, in Jeanne's words, "nudged by some force of love into each other's lives, one...call at a time."

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Of course, the world does not always conform to this standard of listening.

Many days, that seems like an understatement.

But when we develop our skills of compassionate presence, we can learn to stay in relationship—even when the interaction is challenging.

The Hindu sage Ramana Maharshi was once asked, "How should one treat others?" and he replied, "There are no others."

He arrived at this insight through years of contemplative practice.

But it's something I believe we all sense deeply, and it is something increasingly revealed by science.

We are not disconnected individuals  
on our own separate paths.

We are each a part of the  
Interdependent Web of All Existence.

We are One.

So indeed, when we do treat our neighbor as  
ourselves, to quote the very familiar teaching<sup>4</sup>, we  
are treating ourselves as ourselves.

In our individualistic mindset, it is truly difficult to  
break out of the habit of thinking of “me” and “you,”  
“us” and “them”...

But the great spiritual teachers all tell us  
that that those divisions are illusions.

And, as we know, they are breaking the world apart.

The spiritual practice of simply sitting still and  
listening—  
whether to another person, to ourselves,  
or even to the world as it is ...

Allows us to be grounded in something  
stronger and deeper than our own individuality.

From that grounded, interconnected place,  
we can move in the direction of love and healing...

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<sup>4</sup> Mark 12:21

In exactly the way we are meant to,  
as a unique component of one Body.

From the starting-point of openness,  
listening and unconditional Love,

We can answer the call.

We can stay on the line.

We can be a healing presence  
in this world, here and now.

Thanks for listening.

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