

"Non-Anxious Presence in a Pandemic"

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First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto
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I don't know what to say.

This is a new situation for all of us.

Instead of standing in the pulpit in our familiar sanctuary,
I'm here in front of my computer...

In my ordinary space, seeing you all in a completely
different way.

I find myself wondering what I might offer in this
moment...knowing that you all have access to much wisdom
and information on the Internet right now--

There is no shortage of advice or information or
even inspirational words.

What I find myself seeking, in my own life,
and wanting to provide to you, is presence.

In my seminary studies, one of the most useful concepts of
Higher Power I understood was that of the Non-Anxious
Presence.

I find that's what I seek today, and what I'd like to channel.

Though it's not easy.

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Over the last few days, so much has changed.

So many activities that provide meaning in our lives have suddenly fallen away...

...dropping like dominoes in the face of a public health threat like none we've ever seen.

In some ways, it seems that nothing really matters.

The meetings that got cancelled, the show that won't go on, the coffee date with friends that is put off now into the vague and distant future...

None of it matters...and yet, it does.

All of the sudden, our lives have been turned upside down, by something new and dangerous and unseen.

Suddenly we're adrift in a new world without the usual sources of meaning we thought we needed.

So, in addition to worry and fear about the virus itself, we're also experiencing grief.

We are longing for presence and aware of loss.

We're allowed to feel disoriented and bewildered at a time like this.

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It's true that technology can connect us when we can't gather in our usual way. This is a blessing.

And the fact that we're meeting each other today speaks to our resiliency, our curiosity and our openness to change.

These are valuable assets at any time.

We're learning that our presence to one another is not limited to physical in-the-room contact.

It can, thankfully, be maintained and nurtured through technology.

And yet, we may notice the distance between us today...and we may long for the physical presence we are missing.

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Perhaps in this unexpected time of distancing and space, we can remember that human presence thrives in very small groups as well as large ones.

It was once said that wherever just two or more are gathered, the Holy Presence of relationship is there.

That presence can take place by phone, across a table...and even across long distances of time and space.

Writing a letter to a friend,
or holding them in loving intention,
connects us to that person...
even if they have been absent from us for a very long time.

The same can be true of listening to music...
preparing a meal...or gazing at a photograph.

These connect us in deep and soulful ways to other human beings...and to sources of meaning beyond ourselves.

They connect us to Presence in a larger way...and it seems to me we need that now.

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Sudden change--sudden loss--is extremely difficult.

And it is likely to give rise to a range of feelings.

In the spirit of Non-Anxious Presence, we can notice them all without judgment and give ourselves permission to feel them.

We may be feeling fear today.

Worry or nervousness...a sense of being deeply unsettled.

We may be feeling sadness, overwhelm or deep fatigue today.

We may be noticing irritation, frustration...

Perhaps judgment of others...or a strong desire to control.

On the other hand, we may feel a sense of excitement in this crisis...new purpose...a sense of mission or clarity at this time.

As I notice myself feeling disoriented, tired, and slowed-down right now, I affirm that every person responds to loss and challenge differently.

All of these feelings, and more, make up the wondrous diversity of what it means to be human...

What it means to live within the interdependent and ever-changing web of life.

When we are fully present to all the ways we're responding to this crisis...

We hold ourselves and each other in love...
Whether we are in close proximity to one another, or far away.

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It has been noted by many people that this crisis might help us understand life in new and necessary ways.

It might help us become more present to all of the people, near and far from us, who live in uncertainty and fear every day--because of poverty, war, climate catastrophe and of course, disease.

It might teach us that in fact we **CAN** change our patterns.

We **can** live with less...and more simply...for the sake of others and the planet.

I certainly hope we learn that.

And I hope that through all of this...

I, and you, and all the people we know and don't know...

Can be touched

and held and supported

by the Non-Anxious Presence we need:

The Presence we can offer to one another
in so many ways.

Blessings to you...and peace.