

Wounds and Band-aids

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Eight years ago, I was a brand-new ministerial intern trying her best to be on top of the myriad work of ministry. I had gotten advice to write my sermons early in the week, and I wrote one on the day before the 2016 US Presidential election. And I had to re-write that sermon on the Saturday following. Eight years later, you'd think I would have learned my lesson. But no. I was prepared for worshiping with all you good people. I was not prepared for the outcome of the latest election. My ability to delude myself astounds me and pains me. What follows is not the sermon I imagined I would give today.

Today, my life is upended in ways different from and worse than in 2016. I know there are Americans in this congregation. I know that the US election will have repercussions for Canadians. As human beings, we all suffer. That is a fact of our human experience, no matter our privilege, no matter our social position. Following on the US election, our suffering takes different turns. And even in this suffering—my own and that of so many others more vulnerable than I am—I find myself with more and better tools than I had in 2016 for living with the pain and suffering. And I will need those tools if I am to give thanks and praise for all that is my life, if I am truly to use my life for the common good, if I am to live in the world as it is rather than how I wish it to be.

And so, I reflect with you this morning about wounds and suffering and how we might live with all of that in ways that heal rather than cause further harm, to ourselves and each other. May nothing evil cross this strange space we share. May you know you are not alone in your pain, no matter its nature.

When I was a young girl, I fell down and skinned my knees, a lot. It was my mother who picked me up, washed me off, and smeared on some first aid cream. And my mother, she wiped my tears and told me to buck up—it really wasn't so bad. But she did not put a Band-aid on it, not ever. When I became a mother, I made a major investment in the Band-aid brand. If my kid wanted three Band-aids and some fancy antiseptic cream on top of a paper cut I couldn't see with a magnifying glass, well she could have them. Small hurts often need big responses.

A Band-aid might seem a little thing, but back in the 1960s and 70s my parents belonged to “the working poor,” and a Band-aid for anything less than a nearly severed finger was just an extravagance, a luxury they could not afford. When I became a parent in the 1990s, I was living in a very different economic situation, able to stockpile things like Band-aids and, oh, just about anything I wanted, pretty much when I wanted. Band-aids are a not-so-little-thing for me. Rather, they are one metaphor for the class and economic difference marking my childhood from my adulthood. In the world we live in today, I count myself fortunate to know both realities. It makes it

a bit easier to put myself in the place of people different from myself, who perhaps voted differently than I did because they have experienced differently the economy that looks so very good to me. I count myself fortunate, but I am not exempt from the wounding.

We are all of us wounded, in some way. Wounded by experiences in childhood, sometimes harmed by the families who were supposed to love and protect us. Wounded by friends and companions, and also strangers, with vile words or violent actions. Wounded by living in neighborhoods polluted by toxins in land, water, and air, callously and legally left behind by defunct or thriving industry. Wounded by the world, which hates something about who we are, oppressive systems denying our rights, even denying our humanity, in the effort for power. In the wounding, we suffer. In the unhealed parts of ourselves, we suffer. And sometimes our own suffering causes us to harm others. Sometimes in the effort to protect ourselves, to put a Band-aid on our own suffering, we harm others. And we harm ourselves.

One of the characteristics of this last US presidential election is the intensity of polarization. I know it is something you, my Canadian siblings, are contemplating as well. We find ourselves not only on opposites sides of a political divide, but we have learned to hate those on the other side. We have been encouraged to see those on the other side as sinful, evil, crazy, less-than-human. If you give someone a Band-aid, you are coddling them. How can you be so stupid? If you withhold a Band-aid, how can you be so cruel? My mother was wrong—sometimes it really is that bad and a Band-aid is warranted. I was wrong, too. Band-aids sometimes just hide the wound left unhealed. One way or the other, one way and the other, we are too often failing to see the humanity in each other, and thus we are wounding each other and thus we are wounding ourselves.

Why does it matter that we are wounding ourselves when we are wounding each other? Sometimes I fear that if we don't find some self-interest in this effort to make the world better, we just won't. The poet tells, "Before you know what kindness really is you must lose things, feel the future dissolve in a moment. Before you know kindness as the deepest thing inside, you must know sorrow as the other deepest thing. You must wake up with sorrow. You must speak to it till your voice catches the thread of all sorrows and you see the size of the cloth." Another way to say this is to say that we must acknowledge our broken hearts. We must be willing to look at our own wounding so that, in the words of Joanna Macy, Gaian teacher and scholar of Buddhism, "The heart that breaks open can contain the whole world."

And what is the risk if we don't do this, if we refuse to see that our humanity and that of everyone else resides at least in part in our woundedness? In the words of Euro-American radical feminist Susan Griffin, "The moment I have defined another being as my enemy, I lose part of myself, the complexity and subtlety of my vision. I begin to exist in a closed system. When anything goes wrong, I blame my enemy. If I wake troubled, my enemy had led me to this feeling. If I cannot sleep, it is because of my enemy. Slowly all the power in my life begins to be located outside. And my whole being is defined in relation to this outside force, which becomes daily more monstrous, more evil, more laden with all the qualities in myself I no longer wish to own. The quality of my thought

then is diminished. My imagination grows small. My self seems meager. For my enemy has stolen all of these.” What a nightmare of existence. I hate suffering. I don’t want to feel pain, to pull the Band-aid off or leave myself open and vulnerable. But without facing the reality of my hurt—and the way my hurt can continue to cause hurt—I perpetuate what I hate. I ignore the world as it is and continue to cushion myself in division and false reality. The effort, though, seems insurmountable.

And then I remember, then I recall what I have learned so deeply over the last eight years, the tools that can get me through and work toward healing. And I know it is community that will do this. Alone, I can lean into enemy-thinking and enemy-making. But I have a community, we have this community of shared values that we strive to live into—our Unitarian Universalist covenants and principles. They are solid and trustworthy when my own inclinations draw me into isolation, to lick my wounds alone and perhaps make them worse. We share our sorrow and our wounds, and thus we admit that we cannot heal alone. As the poet says, “Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine. Whoever you are, no matter how lonely, the world offers itself to your imagination, over and over announcing your place in the family of things.” May be hear the call.

Yesterday, I anchored myself in my beautiful, imperfect, divided and fractious community—kicked through the physical space of my Buffalo, NY neighborhood, crunching leaves releasing and the scent of necessary decay. I moved with the mostly white shoppers at the co-op and Penzeys who likely voted as I did, and then also with the mostly Latina and Latino shoppers at the Price Rite, weighing the cost of loaves of bread and choosing the least expensive, who maybe voted differently. I turned toward my most vulnerable friends, more at risk than I am at the moment, let them know I love them, let them know I am handy, asking nothing of them. I stockpile emergency contraception medication, ready to send out of state if needed.

And today, I come to church, and not just because I am the minister. I come so grateful for our UU spaces, our faith’s acknowledgement of our trials and tribulations, of our need for each other in the healing, of our commitment to work together to bring about the alternative vision of diversity and unity for which we so long. In this moment, it feels like there is not enough love, hope, peace, or joy. And in that reality, in that truth, I have faith in our ability to move together to heal ourselves and the world. “Then it is only kindness that makes sense anymore.”