

Blessings We Can Offer

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First Unitarian Society of Plainfield

Rev. Ann Marie Alderman



I was in my first few months as a student chaplain. A chaplaincy internship that would last a year. My areas of responsibility were the Trauma Center, the Medical and the Surgical Intensive Care Units. I was paged to a room in MICU. I checked with the nurse before entering. She told me that the patient, an elderly man, was near the end, and both he and his wife were requesting that his breathing tube be removed. In this hospital, some fifteen years ago, it

was not the norm for a patient or their next of kin to ask for this. So, the staff had paged for a chaplain wanting me to verify that this couple knew what they were asking for.

I entered to room, announcing myself as their chaplain. I then spent nearly that day with this couple, staying with them until the man took his last breath and his heart stopped beating.

Those few hours changed the course of my life. I became what this couple needed.

Perhaps, you have a similar story. Perhaps you have a story of spending a few hours, a few moments, becoming who was needed. Perhaps, you like me, have a story of having entered into a formative space, unsure of yourself, yet on the other side becoming someone who was needed?

Remember those few hours, when you were propelled into a journey to be more fully yourself, to move closer to the potential for whomever you were born to be.

Unitarian Universalists have traditionally believed in what we often call “original blessing”. Rather than, starting with original sin, we say that all babies are born with a uniqueness that if fulfilled can be for the greater good.

That original blessing can lay dormant for a long time. It can be crushed. Or it can be nurtured, reinforced, until it becomes a force for good that touches other lives.

In that hospital room, I found a man dying, being kept alive by a breathing tube. I found a woman, who told me as soon as I introduced myself that she and her husband were believers ready to go to heaven, in fact they were eager to go. They were ready. He was ready.

I took them at their word, left the room and told the nurses it was OK to remove the breathing tube.

While that procedure was going on, the wife and I went to a waiting area. I asked her to tell me more about her husband. She told me that he had been a gospel preacher for years, since he was a teen. And that she had herself become a teacher of the good news some 20 years ago. She described how hard her journey had been. How she had finally achieved what she was sure was her calling.

It was clear to me from the words she used and the theology behind her words that they were the kind of evangelicals who, if they realized I was a liberal, lesbian, would not accept me as a chaplain.

We went back in her husband's hospital room, continuing our conversation. She started asking about me. It was then that I became so frightened of the judgment I was convinced was about to come my way, that I faked my pager going off, and left her.

I had to take a break from the intensity of my own fears.

Have you ever been in a place in your life where you have been feels suddenly inadequate to get you where are feeling you need to go next?

You are afraid.

You are beginning to understand that what has kept you together to date, what has made you feel safe and comfortable, is just a house of cards. If any card is moved even a little bit, the whole house you have created is going to fall.

That kind of fear can be paralyzing.

We all know that fear doesn't make good decisions. Yet, fear must be respected.

I was afraid of this woman's judgment, fearful that I wasn't (in her eyes) good enough, so I ran away.

I say now I was respecting my fear. But then I was just feeling paralyzed. But I went back.

Her husband's breathing was now labored, and his heart beat was slowing down. We waited at his side for hours for the time when his body would finally stop serving his soul. For him to go to his reward. (That was the words they used.)

His wife and I kept talking during the wait. She continued to tell me about herself and I tried to do my best listening. Yet, I was still afraid I was going to prove myself not good enough.

She stopped at one point, looked me in the eyes, and told me “I needed to claim a blessing”.

She did not know it, but years before this, when I had been an undergraduate studying religion, my major paper had been on Pentecostalism. Her terminology was familiar to me, but I didn't know exactly what she meant.

So, I asked.

Back then, I knew just a little about Universalism. But since then, I have been convinced that Pentecostalism and Universalism have some important themes in common.

She said; “You are called to the ministry, but you have yet to claim it, to stand in it, to become who you are meant to be. I know you are afraid, but you needn't be. I've been where you are, too. You are becoming and part of becoming means that you are not only blessed, but that you must claim that blessing.

She was right, so right. I was so afraid she would find out I was not straight, no longer a Christian, an imposter as a chaplain.

She told me of that she had been in the same place. When she first tried to answer her calling as a good news teacher, she feared she was not a man, not the head of her household, not educated, a divorcee.

What I heard her say was that we were the same; flawed human beings without the proper credentials, yet blessed with a role to play for the greater good.

“Claim” it, she said. Claim the blessing that is already yours.

Has there been a time when you were afraid to be all of who you were meant to be? Has there been a time when a person came into your life and told you in effect, to claim a blessing?

Have you been that person for someone else?

Writing this sermon reminded me of a reading popular some years ago, still appropriate:

“Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, 'Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous?' Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of [the Universe]... Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glorythat is within us. It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.”

— Marianne Williamson

What is the task of this congregation, of each of us, and all of us together? It is to shine in such a way we give others permission to do the same.

Let us go shining. Let us liberate this place. Let us liberate each other for the greater good. Let us liberate ourselves and everyone we meet with our blessing, claimed.
