

## **You Are the New Day**

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This morning, as I reflected on all the blessings you bring, as I reflected upon us as a congregation, a church, our faith, as blessings, I was trying to figure out what to tell you so you would understand how important you are, how you save lives and save souls and most of the time you don't even know it.

I was thinking I could tell you about a woman who once came into my office. Her minister had raped her and she ended the ensuing pregnancy with an abortion. She came to the church aching for forgiveness that she wasn't sure she deserved.

I was thinking I could tell you this morning about a couple of women in their sunset years who walked up to me, hand in hand, at a District Assembly. Considering I really didn't recognize them at all, didn't have a clue who they were, I was a little surprised when they embraced me with genuine jubilation and said, "We did it Joan! After decades in loveless marriages we left our husbands and have been gloriously happy together ever since, and it's all because of what you said."

I could tell you my own family story but that will wait for another day. I was trying to think of the best way to tell you how important you are in the lives of others. What a blessing you are, what a blessing this church is, and I decided I'd tell you about Gary.

Gary came to church one chilly, fall morning and I could see he was a newcomer. I greeted him warmly, noted his European scarf, and commented on his dapper sense of style. He came back to church, always alone and quickly made himself a fixture in congregational life. On Sundays he was a greeter, on Mondays he might be power-washing the patio, on Wednesdays he hosted the men's coffee group, on Saturdays he was scrubbing the kitchen. Every day he went about his business quietly, offering only the odd comment of profound wit and wisdom, and every day

he wormed his way more deeply into our hearts. We found ourselves wondering how we had ever got by without him.

Now you know, we Unitarian Universalists like to talk. We especially like talking about ourselves and our opinions. We have all kinds of get-togethers to talk about who we are, where we came from, what we believe, and what we think about any and everything. But Gary didn't participate in our custom of openly sharing the stories of our lives. In fact he was notably silent about family, employment, education, pretty much anything. I knew he sold his house and was now living in a trailer. I knew he had a sister who wouldn't talk to him. I knew he was unemployed but considerably younger than the average retiree. I knew that he used to sky dive and explore underwater caves. I knew he was single even though he was plenty charming.

But that was all I knew. And a long-legged, nasty shadow of fear crawled under my skin. I wouldn't admit it out loud, but my spidey senses were tingling. I began to harbor a doubt that our much beloved friend had a "secret." Alcoholic? Mental illness? Felon? Pedophile?

For some years we all continued on like that. Gary and the staff holding the day to day operations of the church together. But one day Gary showed up with a cane. "Gout," he said. But then he began calling in sick for Greeter duty, and I knew it was time to make a pastoral call. It turned out Gary had a horrible disease, the name of which is too long to remember, and the disease itself is too awful to imagine. All the nerve cells in the body lose their protective coating so they all begin screaming pain throughout every muscle and organ. Eventually the muscles lose their strength and it only gets worse day by day, and the worst part of this disease is it won't kill you. For that reason it is often known as the "suicide disease."

This turned out to be Gary's "secret." This is why he had stopped working. This is why he didn't seek out a loving relationship. This is why he was biding time in a trailer. This is why he had come to us, seeking a community that would accept him for who he was and accept the decision he had made about the end of his life. The "secret" slowly escaped out of its cage and

into our shared congregational home. The church opened its arms and held him in an embrace of love as soft as you would hold an injured baby bird in a downy comforter.

The last time Gary allowed me to visit him we met in a coffee shop. He didn't want me to see the state of his trailer. He was frail, barely able to walk, bony, aged far beyond his years. About a month after I moved here, I received word from the congregation that Gary had died. He had, as expected, taken his life. But before he left us, he cleaned his home. He carefully wrote numerous stamped and addressed letters to be mailed, and labeled a number of objects and items in his room asking that they be given to various people. The police said they had never seen a suicide that was so "considerate."

Gary was not depressed, angry, vengeful or bitter. He was just done with the pain. Although there was no one with him when he died, he was not alone. He didn't feel alone. In his sacred death, his community honored Gary's life, and gave him the privacy he had always requested.

When I received my letter, he told me how important our friendship was in the last few years of his life. How the church had become his family and his home, and how it had all happened for him because on that first fall day, so many years ago, when he was feeling desperately alone and lost in the world, I had welcomed him into the church and commented on his handsome scarf.

When we save someone's life it does not mean that they are going to live forever. None of us are going to get out of this alive. When the church saves someone's life, or, dare I say it, someone's soul, we are loving them so fiercely, so boldly that they begin to understand without a shadow of a doubt for the brief days they have on this planet they are good, precious, and irreplaceable, and every fiber of their being belongs. When we save someone's life, they are able to let go of their fears, let go of their distrust, let go of their judgments, in a moment of truth that can grow into something larger. When we are saved, we let go of the tremendous gap

between us. We become present to hope, to courage, and to our own strength. We feel the love we had not yet known, but had been holding us all along.

All I really want to say today is that you never, never know when you are the new day. You never know when you will say or do something that wakes up the sun, so some struggling soul can come home at last and discover joy. We are called to be people of hope. We are called to offer a saving message of possibility beyond despair, a saving message of compassion and community.

What I want to tell you is that I know, without a shadow of a doubt, that this church and this faith saves lives and souls. It is vitally important that we are here for all who are searching for a home, and it is vitally important that we are healthy so we can hold all who are here, and all who may come. It is vitally important we remember the future and build the church for our children and their children.

And so I invite you, this Stewardship Sunday, to remember all our blessings. Remember that we aren't asking for money to keep the lights on, or to mend the roof, or to pay the staff Or even to support our social justice ministries. We are asking for none of that. We are definitely asking for money, and we are asking you to be generous, but we are asking so we can continue to be a community of hope, courage, strength and love for all who come here. So we can continue to save lives and souls today, tomorrow and forever.

I invite you to join me giving at the recommended fair-share level. It may be a stretch, it is for me, but I'm increasing my pledge. Isn't it worth it? And I want you to remember, your fair-share is not based on our budget. It is based on your income. Give what you can give. Give not until it hurts, but until it feels wonderful, until it feels like you are part of something larger than yourself.

Be joyful, be generous. You are good, precious, irreplaceable, and every fiber of your being belongs. You are the new day.