

Sunday, October 4, 2020
“Widening the Space for Compassion” with Donna San Antonio

Welcome and Lighting of Chalice – Rev. Betsy Tabor with Daniel H.

Welcome. Here we seek justice and truth and understanding.
Here we celebrate life and contemplate mystery.
Here we seek healing and wholeness. Welcome, all.

Our service this morning is called “Widening the Space for Compassion” with our guest speaker and good friend, Donna San Antonio. Donna works work with young people. She’s a community organizer, counselor, and educator who’s interested in what impacts outcomes for young people, what can make them better. Donna was the founding director of the Appalachian Mountain Teen Project and today is Associate Professor of Counseling and Psychology at Lesley University. She continues to consult to school and community programs in rural NH.

This morning we light our chalices and candles in the spirit of open hearts.

Centering Music - Om Mani Padme Hum (Buddist mantra)

Shared Affirmation

Hymn - “Rising Green”

A Time for All Ages - Marion Posner

Every time I thought of today’s theme and what I might talk to you about today, a story prodded me. Stories have a way of doing that of saying: “Look at me. Think about me. Perhaps see me in a way you have not seen me before?” It was akin to being prodded by Socrates and his gadfly. So I took notice, and here it is. It is a true story of what happened to me about ten years ago.

There is a convent where children, from the ages of 3 until early teens, are taken to live. They are children who have been badly traumatized and can no longer live at home. They stay at the convent where they can be loved and kept safe until they can go back to their homes or are adopted. I was asked to come, with my experience in theatre and storytelling, to be with the children on Saturday mornings for a few months. A tall order! It turned out to be some of the hardest work I have ever done, but also the most wonderful.

I spent many hours with the young people, searching for ways forward out of the darkness of their past. Storytelling and puppets were powerful. The extraordinary thing about story is that it creates worlds in which we can search for meaning, stretch our tolerance. Our imagination is one of our most precious gifts.

My story is about the day that the Head Nun Sister, let us call her BonaVenture, asked me to put on a play in the nearby Nursing Home. “A Nursing Home, sister?” I queried, having performed many times in Nursing Homes and experienced the challenges of doing so.

“Och aye,” she replied in her rich Scottish accent, “It will help them understand that there are others who also have a difficult time in life.”

I decided to write the play myself, so I could tailor it to my cast of performers. I started by asking each of them what they dreamed to be, if we imaginatively created a world that they could walk into for the performance.

“A Knight in Shining Armor.” “A ballerina.” “A magnificent dragon.” Sister Bona Venture said she had always fancied being a dragon, and if we made a nice long one, why she could be inside it with the very little ones. “When I am up in the wee hours, holding a little one in my arms as she tells me her troubles, I need to find the dragon in me for strength. And there are times I want to get away from being a peaceful, nicely behaved good nun, and go roar the fury out to the winds so they can take it away.”

“How do you do it Sister, day after day, night after night ~ Caring, understanding, giving strength and love?”

“Prayer.”

“Hmm...Yes.....but I would add your humor. A powerful combination.”

We created props and costumes. We made a dragon, a resplendent dragon, twelve feet long with sparkling eyes and a swishing tail. I bought new paintbrushes for the artists. They’d had to leave home with no belongings so I wanted them to have something in their new life, of their own. When presenting them, I said, care for these brushes and they will care for you.

“I am going to call mine David” said the Knight in Shining armor-to-be. “He’ll my brother. We got separated when I came here. I’ve not seen him since. I’ll paint him into the scenery so he can join us”.

On the big day, we entered the Nursing Home. It was a sea of wheelchairs. It took a while to create a space to put up our portable wooden stage. At last, with costumes on, scenery assembled, we were ready to begin. But where was the Knight in Shining Armor? After a few tense minutes of waiting, he ran up to me. No helmet. “Sorry” he said. “There was this lady in a wheelchair and she snatched off my shining helmet. She said Oh please, please could she wear it, because she had always dreamt of being a knight in shining armor. Sure, I said to her. My dream, too. You can keep it. Forever (wipe nose and sniff), and ever.”

“Ladies and gentlemen, we present ‘THE KIND DRAGON.’ Over the mountain range, while rosy fingered dawn traced the horizon, a magnificent dragon appeared....” No dragon. “Sister, your cue!” Nothing. “A dragon was seen from afar, glistening golden in the morning sun....” No Dragon. “Sister,” I stage-whispered. Sister. That was the cue for the dragon to come on stage!”

“Sorry, sorry,” whispered Sister Bona Venture as she struggled to step inside the dragon’s head and maneuver her retinue of three four and five year olds inside its tail. “There was a lady in a

wheelchair as we passed and she said to the children in the tail please could they come and sit by her so she could tell them a story like she used to tell her little grandbabies. Gavin came out first and said: ‘Of course, Grandmama. I love it when you tell me stories.’ The others followed suit and clapped loudly as she finished. The dragon decided to wait.”

Slightly daunted, I continued onward: “And, as is the way with dragons, the dragon was late and did not appear on the mountain tops until the sun was high in the sky.”

And so it was that the cast of *The Kind Dragon* found ways forward ~ they discovered that others too have needs, and that they could reach out and give joy. I am sure the helmet is still well cared for.

Even little Mary, normally silent, spoke up after the performance to say: “I think we cheered them up a bit. Can’t be any fun, being stuck in a wheelchair all day.”

And I realize that at the essence of this story is that the space for compassion was made bigger, and discovered in an unlikely place.

Reflection, Part 1 - Donna San Antonio

What is compassion? What limits or blocks compassion? By the end of March this year, we were reeling from the understanding that the pandemic was going to cause enormous suffering and death and would change life as we know it. By the end of May, with the horrific murder of George Floyd, we faced into the reality of generational trauma, on-going injustice and inequality on every level for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color. Hurricane season and fires displacing hundreds of thousands of people globally tell us of the urgency of addressing climate change. Everywhere we look we see the vast difference in opportunity and resources – basic resources like reliable food, healthcare, and housing are a constant struggle for many people. And, as we approach the election, we are increasingly aware of how fragile our democracy is. Democracy – this precious human experiment of getting along with each other and over-coming differences for the good of the whole – is very much at risk. And there is the private suffering and losses that have touched every person’s life sitting here today.

Many of us are wondering what to do with all this. With the sense of being thoroughly saturated and overwhelmed? With a fear for the future of our children and grandchildren? And, **what do we do with anger?** I’ve been thinking a lot about that lately. Black feminist, writer, educator and activist bell hooks asked Thich Nat Hanh this question, and he said, *Hold on to your anger and use it as compost in your garden.*

If we are feeling good and angry in response to injustice, violence, and exploitation, and if we use that anger in tandem with compassion to grow something new, to grow our capacity for compassion, and turn our thoughts into action, then we are made for these times. We are needed in these times.

Civility and democracy go hand-in-hand and compassion is the foundation of civility. There are some deepening cracks in that foundation – and those cracks are made more severe by constructing and installing damaging labels and images in our imaginations in order to promote

fear and suspicion. Civility recognizes the human in another person. Labels, reinforced over and over again, tell a single story in an attempt to dehumanize. Labels preclude complexity, derail understanding, and block compassion. They are exceedingly and frighteningly effective in shaping attitudes.

Compassion demands something different of us. Compassion literally means “to suffer together.” It is a feeling of tenderness toward another, a sense of oneness that arises when confronted with the suffering of another. But it is not only a feeling. Compassion is different than sympathy, empathy, and pity because compassion stirs in us a desire to act – to do something to relieve suffering. And, as researchers have shown, it turns out that there is a biological basis for compassion – a deep evolutionary purpose that has played a key role in survival.

But we are all quite susceptible to the ways other people have been portrayed and constructed in our imaginations. Unconsciously influenced by them every day. Recently, there was a car outside my house as it was getting dark. Like many of us, I live on an isolated country road, and I live alone. Car lights were flashing. I looked out the window trying to figure out what was happening. Should I go out? Is it safe? What if? But I headed out and there was a young man looking a bit like my nephew. His car would not start. I was about to get my car and jumper cables when a very big truck came by and stopped. Out of this very big truck came a very big white guy – someone that would conjure a bit of fear in me if I saw him while walking alone in the woods. This man quickly and quietly got the car running, got back in his truck and drove away.

What happens when we encounter difference? Where do our thoughts and feelings go when we encounter a person or an idea that triggers something in us? And, importantly, what happens when we confront the inconsistencies within ourselves? I am sure you hear the premature interpretations in my story. Maybe this story conjures something in your own experience – a time when you assumed something about another person without knowing anything about them.

We construct a world out of our own limited experience and think it is reality. When we are met with something unfamiliar, we unconsciously draw from our experience – what we know – in order to make the unfamiliar, familiar. In a time when we are having to face into multiple challenges all at once, it is hard to sustain curiosity, hard to remain open to evidence that disconfirms what we think we know. Our interpretations are a comforting touchstone – why would we want to undermine or question them? Why would we want to take off the lenses through which we observe the world and try on new lenses that make the world blurry and uncertain? But keeping our questions going – following a pathway to the unknown – is an essential aspect of compassion.

James Baldwin said: *The questions which one asks oneself begin, at least, to illuminate the world, and become one's key to the experience of others.* And one of my favorite quotes from Baldwin is: *The purpose of art is to lay bare the questions that have been hidden by the answers.* **The questions that have been hidden by answers.** And Einstein said: *The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious.* Not certainty but mystery; not answers but question – this is where beauty can be found.

We need to pry ourselves away from what we think we know – not so easy. Rather than the vicious cycle of interpretation that reinforces our answers – what we think we already know – there can be a spiral of entering the unknown, taking in new information, and moving toward what Grace Kindeke said in her amazing talk a few weeks ago, *a commitment to re-invent, to re-learn, to re-cognize, to act, and to commit to transformational change that begins inside us.*

Joys & Concerns - Prelude by Sergei Rachmaninoff, played by Eve Goss

Hymn - “Spirit of Life”

Meditation

We give thanks for the gift of life - precious, beautiful, fragile.
 We are thankful for trees, gardens, smiles, children, elders.
 We are grateful for all that opens our hearts,
 good news and bad - and lessons along the way.

We hold in the light people feeling vulnerable today
 with illness, with pain...fear...addiction
 with loneliness and uncertainty.

May those whom this virus strikes recover and be well,
 over 4,000 people in America every day.
 We especially remember the President and the First Lady
 and the wave of people newly ill in Washington.
 May our prayers ripple outward to all who suffer.

We pray for wisdom and heart:
 that we do our part to heal the brokenness
 we and our ancestors have wrought.
 May we forgive. May we make space for love.
 And toward all beings on the journey,
 may we turn with empathy and good will.

May the world remind us
 of who we want to be
 and inspire us to lead with love.

[Respond to Joys and Concerns]

Reading - “Call Me By My True Names” By Thich Nhat Hanh, read by Sandra Carr

Don’t say that I will depart tomorrow— even today I am still arriving.

Look deeply: every second I am arriving to be a bud on a spring branch, to be a tiny bird, with still-fragile wings, learning to sing in my new nest, to be a caterpillar in the heart of a flower, to be a jewel hiding itself in a stone.

I still arrive, in order to laugh and to cry, to fear and to hope. The rhythm of my heart is the birth and death of all that is alive.

I am a mayfly metamorphosing on the surface of the river. And I am the bird that swoops down to swallow the mayfly.

I am a frog swimming happily in the clear water of a pond. And I am the grass-snake that silently feeds itself on the frog.

I am the child in Uganda, all skin and bones, my legs as thin as bamboo sticks. And I am the arms merchant, selling deadly weapons to Uganda.

I am the twelve-year-old girl, refugee on a small boat, who throws herself into the ocean after being raped by a sea pirate.

And I am also the pirate, my heart not yet capable of seeing and loving.

I am a member of the politburo, with plenty of power in my hands. And I am the man who has to pay his “debt of blood” to my people dying slowly in a forced-labor camp.

My joy is like Spring, so warm it makes flowers bloom all over the Earth. My pain is like a river of tears, so vast it fills the four oceans.

Please call me by my true names, so I can hear all my cries and laughter at once, so I can see that my joy and pain are one.

Please call me by my true names, so I can wake up and the door of my heart could be left open, the door of compassion.

Reflection, Part 2 - Donna San Antonio

What opens space for compassion? How can we be radically open to others – to see, to hear, and to bear witness? There are four things that come to mind, but I am sure you will have many more thoughts on how you make space for compassion in your own life.

First, we cannot have compassion for others without compassion for oneself. We need to start wherever we are. Without self-judgment or self-blame. *We are everyday still arriving.* That garden we are cultivating will have to deal with drought, bugs, early frost, and whatever else. It is what it is and we will not be successful at growing everything. Self-compassion is important.

Second is the idea of making the invisible visible. Here I want to draw from the young people that have influenced my life and grown me up over the years. Recently, I conducted interviews with 10, 20-25-year olds without a high school diploma to learn about their work lives and their well-being. When we talked about why they left high school, I consistently heard stories of profound loss, trauma, and interpersonal violence based on gender, ability, sexual orientation, and social class. Over and over again, they said they carried that pain alone and no one noticed. One of them said,

If someone would have reached out to me, I would have been better off... If I would have known...that other people were going through similar situations, [and] able to just talk it out with someone... I would have been able to maybe start my journey into bettering myself sooner... I feel there's no way my teachers didn't see at least some portion of what was going on...someone should have reached out.

Someone should have noticed. Someone should have reached out. Let's make a point of seeing and acknowledging the young people in our lives, for example, making eye contact, smiling with our eyes, and connecting in a meaningful way with the young people that check us out and bag our groceries.

Third is to tell the stories. The bridges that have been constructed for us to use in an effort to reach toward each other, are crumbling. We need to re-enforce and reconstruct those bridges. One way to do that is by telling the stories that give us hope. Fred Rogers, Mr. Rogers, said:

When I was a boy, and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, "Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping." There are still so many helpers – so many caring people in the world.

Yes, there are. We might be in a crisis of massive proportions, the likes of which we have not seen in the US in a very long time. We wonder if we will be okay. But, simultaneously, there is more consciousness about injustice, more random acts of kindness, more people looking for ways to help and to bring change than we have seen in a while.

We need to tell and fully grasp the stories of pain, oppression, injustice, and violence. And equally important is to tell the stories of generosity, courage, forgiveness, resilience, and hope. These stories abound in human history and demonstrated in profound ways in the struggle for justice throughout history. We can make a point of making sure that we and the people around us have both these narratives.

Finally, make space for curiosity and compassion. In 1974, after years of bombing, hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese killed and displaced, Vietnamese Buddhist monk, Thich Nat Hanh said,

The only thing that counts is the ability to understand the pain of a brother. And this brother is neither a number nor a concept. We cannot recognize our brother through an ideology or a political label. People have been shooting at labels, and by doing so, they have shot many of their brothers and sisters.

How can I use my experience of pain and loss to lean into the experience of pain and loss of others? We tend to think there are scarce resources when it comes to empathy and compassion; if that group gets it then there is less for me. Instead, the more we are able to hold and highlight the suffering of others the more compassion and empathy there will be to go around. We want to use our emotion and experience as compost to be:

- Not only an observer but also a witness;
- Not only hearing but also listening;
- Not only searching for answers but also searching for the questions that are hidden behind our answers;
- Not only thinking but also transforming our thoughts into ethical action.
- And, when there are ruptures in our own awareness and self-concept, we can find the courage to keep those ruptures open for examination.

In a journal entry in 1965, Thich Nat Hanh wrote, *If you take your deepest questions into the core of your being, into your very blood and marrow, one day, quite naturally, you will understand the connection between thought and action.*

The Morning Offering – “I’ve Got Peace Like a River” African-American spiritual

Community Response

What is opening your heart these days?

Andy D: This is a small thing, but at the demonstration at the Don Jr. event at the Lobster Trap a couple of weeks ago, pretty much everybody on both sides of the street were treating each other like labels. Afterwards, one of the people from inside the Lobster Trap, as he was leaving, shared a laugh with somebody on the other side of the street, that had nothing to do with what any of the people were there for, and it was just a lovely human moment. I really appreciated it because it was one of those sorts of events that are pretty uncomfortable, whichever side of the road you’re on, so to speak.

Pamela A: I have to admit that the President contracting Covid has been a real challenge for me to look at myself and my ability to be compassionate. It’s an ongoing learning lesson.

Amanda H: Every time I go out, I find somebody who’s not wearing a mask, and I usually make a comment. Yesterday I was leaving our post office, and a guy I’ve never seen was, like, “She’s afraid of Covid and freedom!”

My new stock response is “Because I love you. I wear a mask because I love you.” It usually throws people off. It works for me because I’m not wearing a mask because I think I’m not going to spread it, because I don’t leave my house, but I care that other people don’t get it. Usually when I say, “Because I love you,” they either smile or laugh or wish me a good day. Or they stop – and it takes away that divisiveness, that politicizing, that “fake news” attitude towards wearing a mask – and it becomes an “Oh, well, have a good day.” “You too!”

Andrea W: Fiona – who’s normally very upbeat and very in her element and manages very well recognizing all the time the privilege and responsibility that she wears in the world – called, having just a hard time and a hard moment in junior year, maybe normal junior year blues, but also, in this time, school on zoom, feeling like she’s not learning anything, what’s the point, who needs this kind of expensive piece of paper....She realized also that she needed to ask for help – she needs to ask *the world* for help. It just broke my heart open to all of the situations of all of us and of people in the world sharing these difficult moments that we’re all sharing in this crazy pandemic, all of the parents who are home with children on zoom or who are risking sending children to school...just came home with her calls this past week.

In allowing the asking for help, it’s like a breaking open of some of the stress. Just to say those words, “I need help” and to hear those words is a real gift that we all can give each other on the planet, in our communities, in our congregation. It’s wonderful to hear someone say that and to allow the questions under the answers. Too often, “I’m fine” hides everything that we don’t ask each other. So I’ve really been awake to that this past week.

Hymn - “How Can I Keep From Singing”

Extinguishing of Chalice/Candles

Benediction

Go now in peace.

Deeply regard each other;

Truly listen to each other;

Speak what each must speak;

Be ready in every moment to disarm your own heart;

Rejoice in love. - UU Rev. Barbara Hamilton-Holway, adapted

Postlude The moon and Mars and Jupiter have shined into our homes this week. And so our postlude, which Shana composed and recorded some time ago, called “Moonrise.”

This service can be viewed until January 4, 2021 at:

https://uuma.zoom.us/rec/share/6khDgHhEtkTLz59NAEarG2X2nkGZsnKF5Q_4TWXukVOrfk mGBSRWckb0Kuh4dUjA.Db6iE9LhiH0NdV77

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