



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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“Comfort Me”

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Centering Thoughts

In poverty and other misfortunes of life, true friends are a sure refuge. Aristotle

Have courage for the great sorrows of life and patience for the small ones; and when you have laboriously accomplished your daily task, go to sleep in peace. God is awake. Victor Hugo

When things are bad, we take comfort in the thought that they could always get worse. And when they are, we find hope in the thought that things are so bad they have to get better.
Malcolm Forbes

The ache for home lives in all of us. The safe place where we can go as we are and not be questioned. Maya Angelou

Sermon

It's often remarked that the job of a minister is to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. Because here we hold diverse beliefs and comfort around religious language, I'm sure I both comfort and afflict regularly. Ministry to Unitarian Universalists comes with many risks, We're equal opportunity offenders.

I'll try to keep affliction to a minimum. Fortunately for us, comfort comes from many sources and by many names. Before we look at some of these, please hold onto the string of yarn you were given when you entered.

I'm copying an idea from the Reverend Marlin Lavanhar at the UU church in Tulsa, Oklahoma. If you don't have one, just imagine you're holding one. It's not critical that you have a piece of string.

Many of you share with me, and with each other, the times in your life when you need comfort. If you're alive you've needed comfort at some point. I'm sure some time you felt broken, defeated, or in need of being made whole. Maybe a friend badly disappointed you, and they lost your trust. Maybe they lost your friendship entirely. If a friend has ever let you down, please make a knot somewhere on your string.

Have you experienced the death of a family member or friend? Most of us have known someone who has died. Maybe a parent or grandparent? Maybe you had to put a pet dog or cat to sleep? They're family. If so, please put another knot in your string.

Have you suffered from a serious or chronic illness? If you've recovered from an illness or are still dealing with a health issue put another knot in your string.

Maybe some of you felt the universe or God let you down. Have you experienced a kind of spiritual separation? Maybe it was a time when you felt alone and unsupported? Make a knot for that, too.

How about an organization, a job, a country, your family, your kids, maybe even this Fellowship? Maybe we or they weren't there for you when you were in need. Add another knot if that describes you.

Maybe you broke or lost something that held deep meaning for you, such as a treasured gift or memento like the many people who lost homes and possessions to hurricanes, floods, and other natural disasters. They must feel broken and in need of comfort and aid. Have you experienced any losses like these? If so, make another knot.

Have you struggled with alcohol or drugs, or other addictions? Has a relationship ended in separation or divorce? Has a business ended in bankruptcy or a home in foreclosure? Have you lost a job or been unable to get a job? Do you suffer from a mental illness? All of these are reasons we need healing and comfort. Add more knots to your string if you have experienced any of these.

Have people mistreated you by their racism, sexism, homophobia, or some other 'ism? Add more knots.

Other experiences may come to mind that I haven't mentioned. If so, add another knot for these other pain-causing events in your life.

Now, if there's anyone in the room without a knot, you've either led an incredibly charmed life or you're totally oblivious to the fullness of life. Since I think that's a misfortune, go ahead and put a knot in your string.

Look around you. Do you see that everyone has at least one knot and probably more? Life includes too many opportunities for us to be hurt and to suffer. We can't live without reasons for knots.

I am reminded of an ancient story from India about a woman carries her dead child around the neighborhood in search of a medicine to cure him. Eventually she is directed to the Buddha. He tells her the medicine requires her to gather a mustard seed from every house in the village where no one has died. Of course, she can't collect a single seed, for every family has experienced the death of a parent, a sibling, or a child. The woman then realizes the impermanence of all life and that she is not alone in her suffering. Learning that death is a normal part of life, she feels comforted.

We, all of us here, are everyone she encountered while seeking mustard seeds for all of us have suffered. And, we are the woman as well. We may not carry a dead child, but we carry our knots inside us, knots that weigh upon our souls or spirits. And we are not alone in this.

The ancient psalmist asked, "From where does my help or comfort come?" I ask you, from where does your comfort come? How do you get through life after your spirit breaks? How do you and I mend our spirits and carry on?

In Psalm 121, the author answers his own question. He says the Lord, his God, provides comfort because the lord is his keeper, his protector. In the midst of all that could harm him, he

believed God was always present. He received comfort knowing he was never alone. The psalmist may speak for some of you here. Your own understanding of God or the divine may give you comfort.

For others, this psalm offers no comfort, no meaning. Instead, you might turn to Buddhism which teaches that life includes suffering. The more attachments we have to people, things, and ideas, the more we will suffer because what we are attached to can never stay the same. All things change just as all life ends. Relationships change, organizations change, our own ideas change. If we can accept this fact of life and let go of our attachments to what cannot stay the same, we will suffer less. This is Buddhism's comfort.

Every religion offers something to comfort those in need. As Unitarian Universalists we can draw on these many sources of strength; Jewish, Christian, and Buddhist teachings especially. But when one theology or beliefs don't hold true for everyone in the room, how do we find comfort?

I believe in the absence of common beliefs about God, we turn to each other. Our human hands and hearts may also be the hands and heart of God, but they are at least our very human way to comfort. We may add blessings, prayers, or good wishes, too. Together, the hands and hearts of this caring community comfort one another.

We can turn inward for comfort as well. When Viktor Frankl suffered at the hands of the Nazis in a concentration camp, he vowed not to allow them to break his spirit, even though he knew they might kill his body. And they didn't. Frankl survived the Nazi atrocities and wrote *Man's Search for Meaning*. In this book he shared his experiences and what he gained from them, so that he could help others deal with life's challenges. Frankl taught that our attitude, our individual responses to events are in our control, even when the circumstances are out of our control. How we respond or understand the events can make or break us. We can choose to stay strong, make meaning, and get past the trauma and begin a new life.

Our ability to make these choices lies partly in our genetics and partly in our life experiences. Though we have little control over our biological make up, small challenges in life help us build strength and resiliency so that we can face the big traumas. And when you accept that life includes suffering, you can also build upon your ability to feel compassion for others. You can be more kind, loving, and willing to comfort. Knowing you have comforted someone else may also add to your own comfort.

Adversity enables us to gain wisdom and greater depth in our lives. If life were easy and trouble-free, we would be less. With fewer adverse experiences we would have fewer opportunities to learn sympathy or compassion for others who suffer. In the abstract, we may not wish suffering upon anyone, but the reality is that we learn from these experiences. Maturity comes from experience, not age.

Helping you make meaning out of all the knots on your string of life is one reason for religion and religious community. You can make meaning out of life's pain by accepting the challenge as a teacher. And when you get too comfortable, people like me need to afflict you a bit so you can keep growing and deepening your understanding of life. If you're too comfortable and not stretching yourself in some way, you might as well be dead, because at least as far as we know, only dead things experience nothing new and stop growing.

Rev. Lavanhar calls each knot on your string an 'initiatory moment'. That's an opportunity for you to begin anew, to initiate a new understanding of who you are or can become. The events

that test us require us to adjust or change. They are transformational events.

When I learned I had breast cancer ten years ago, my whole view of myself changed. I felt my body had let me down. I was no longer whole, healthy, or immortal. Death became real. I became someone new as I fought through the disease.

For every knot on your string, you were similarly challenged and transformed. Some of these experiences bring new identities—recovering alcoholic, survivor, widower, orphan, or divorcee’. Some knots call for bigger change than others. But how you change and who you become is up to you.

This community is a source of comfort, but it doesn’t come without cost. You must be present so that we can know each other. If you are not present and engaged, we not only can’t comfort you, we won’t know you need comforting. We can’t demand your presence here. We won’t threaten you with eternal damnation if you skip a few Sundays. But to be a community you must commune, you must be present.

When you decide to become a member of this Fellowship, we ask you to sign a covenant of membership. Although we don’t require your signature in blood, we do want you to take this seriously. We want you to freely choose to belong here. But like any partnership, belonging means you give up a little freedom. You sacrifice some individuality for the benefit of the community. We support your individual search for truth and meaning, but we do it within this particular interdependent web of life at UUFA.

During the last several months members of the Committee on Shared Ministry facilitated times for you to meet and discuss what it means to belong here.

Those who participated drafted a covenant statement that reflects what you want to expect from each other. In my language, it expresses how we wish to manifest our desire for greater love and harmony here.

Whether you attended these earlier sessions or not, I encourage you to attend the open meeting after the service today to discuss the draft statement. Like many things here, what you adopt as a congregation in June will give comfort to some and may challenge others. Nothing we do here is without risk, but great benefit can arise when we try.

May this Fellowship be a safe haven for you to risk all that you are and all that you are becoming. May this Fellowship always be a community of comfort, care, and challenge.

May it be so.

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

1. When have you longed for or needed comfort? How did it feel to receive (or not receive) that comfort?
2. How do you protect or strengthen yourself from being/feeling hurt or broken?
3. Share a time when you offered comfort to someone in need. How did that feel and did it change you?