

## **Don't Just Do Something – Sit There!**

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### **Meditation** – on love...

Love... a word often used, sometimes abused...  
Love... actually... all you need *is* love...  
When words falter... love...  
When all else fails... love...  
In celebration, love.  
In sorrow, love.  
So... may we remember it is not so much *who* you love that matters...  
    But *that* you love.  
    Whatever others or society or even the law  
        might say about your love, our love...  
    It is love that matters.  
    Love that will see us through the night.  
    Love that will save us...  
        from hate that would divide.  
        from misunderstanding that would injure.  
    It is love that matters.  
Love... actually... all we need is love.  
May we rest in the sacred presence we offer to one another,  
    ...the sacred presence which is love.

### **Reading**

Psalm 121 – translation/interpretation by Stephen Mitchell:

I look deep into my heart,  
    to the core where wisdom arises.  
Wisdom comes from the Unnamable  
    and unifies heaven and earth.  
The Unnamable is always with you,  
    shining from the depths of your heart.  
His peace will keep you untroubled  
    even in the greatest pain.  
When you find him present within you,  
    you find truth at every moment.  
He will guard you from all wrongdoing;  
    he will guide your feet on his path.  
He will temper your youth with patience;  
    he will crown your old age with fulfillment.  
And dying, you will leave your body  
    as effortlessly as a sigh.

## Sermon

Among the very first things we were taught as part of our Clinical Pastoral Education serving as student hospital chaplains during seminary, we were told to knock before entering, introduce ourselves, take off our coat and hat, and perhaps most important – because you are going to stay a little while...

Sit down.

It's not that you are going to stay all day. But you are there to *be with* the person in the hospital bed – as completely present just for this person as you can be.

After all, all day long nurses, aides, doctors, interns come and go, and rarely do any of them sit down – which is mostly quite understandable, because their important job is to *do* the things that will help the patient get better or to ease the patient's pain or discomfort.

But beyond perhaps fetching a glass of water or opening a window shade, maybe reading a poem... you as chaplain or a friend visiting have very little to *do*, very little you need to do. You are there mostly just to be there.

Don't just do something – enough of that already is going on. Don't just do something – sit there.

Not long before my father died – twenty-three years ago – it was clear that a hospital bed would help him to be more comfortable. So we ordered the bed and my two brothers and I set it up in our parents' bedroom, moving a lot of other furniture in the process. It was a project. Something we could do. So we felt useful, even though in a situation where the final result was not in doubt. And it did make a real difference in Dad's comfort.

But, still, this was not the most important thing about those last few days. Not by a long shot.

The most important thing was that we were all there, not just we three brothers, but our families as well. We were all together spending time with each other and with Dad and Mom. Of course that's what mattered most. That is what was healing – not curing, because we were way past that possibility – but healing for all of us, even or especially we hoped for Dad. For remember: “to heal,” at root, means to make whole.

Don't just do something – sit there.

During the years following Dad's initial diagnosis he sporadically kept a journal, which we now have. As a physician, not surprisingly some of his journal consists of details about his diagnosis, prognosis, the tests he was having, treatments. But the more heartfelt parts of the journal, where it seems his reflections always circled back, were his words of gratitude for precious time spent with Mom, gratitude for visits from his sons and our families, gratitude for time spent with friends. He commented too on how sometimes colors seemed more vivid than ever before, his appreciation for the beauty of our world heightened.

Love and beauty. Dad did lament that there would be things he would now never *do* – he noted that he was “greedy” in that way. But he seemed to realize pretty clearly that more important than what he would be able to do or not do was love given and received, and the beauty right in front of him... and all of us.

Don't just do something. Sit there.

Again, there are of course often things to *do* to ease some terribly difficult or painful situation, illness, dying, suffering of so many kinds. But don't *just* do something – sit there. Be present.

I was once called to be with a man in his fifties who was near the end of his life as a result of ALS. He couldn't move any longer, and he could barely talk – and only in a whisper. What could I *do*? Well, not much. But I could sit there with him, as I did weekly through his last summer; and I could listen as best I could to the words he was able slowly, quietly, to speak.

One of our own Old Ship elders, in earlier days quite the conversationalist, apologized when I visited that he could barely stay awake much less hold up his end of a conversation, as he used to do delightfully. I said no apology needed... it is good just to sit here with you for awhile. He smiled and nodded off again. And it *was* good just to be with him for awhile. I hope it was for him as well.

Now, is there a theological or deeper spiritual grounding for what might be going on when we just sit with someone who is suffering?

At Presbyterian Hospital in San Francisco, which is where I fulfilled my Clinical Pastoral Education requirement, each student chaplain was asked to lead a chapel service one or two times during our chaplaincy. As for me – the only Unitarian Universalist chaplain – I needed to lead a service that could somehow meet the pastoral needs of patients, staff, and chaplains, all of whom would mostly be Christian. And at the same time I needed to be true to my own theology – which is as I have often described it, a sort of mystical humanism.

I chose for my reading the 121<sup>st</sup> Psalm. We heard earlier a very loose translation, more of an interpretation, by Stephen Mitchell. His version begins:

I look deep into my heart,  
to the core where wisdom arises.  
Wisdom comes from the Unnamable  
and unifies heaven and earth.

The far more common translation, which I used at my chapel service, begins like this, with words I expect are more familiar to many of you:

I lift up my eyes to the hills;  
from whence does my help come?  
My help comes from the Lord  
who made heaven and earth.

Remarkably to me, what I chose to say about this Psalm almost thirty years ago became a touchstone for my pastoral ministry in all the years since:

Whatever else we might know or experience about God, I said, we may well be able to affirm that God speaks through words of kindness and prayer, that God touches us through an arm around the shoulder, a hug or pat, and that God is with us when someone who cares is with us, just sits there with us.

To put it the other way around (and continuing to use God language as language for the ineffable mystery that creates and sustains us), we can affirm that *we* are God's hands, God's words, God's presence for one another.

I lift up my eyes to the hills;  
from whence does my help come?

My help comes from God through the word, the touch, the presence of another human being.  
And we each can be that other human being.

I spend time almost every week with some people whose situations I cannot “fix”. But that is not why I am there. When it comes to Old Ship folks I visit, I am there to be *your* hands and words and ears and presence; and God’s too.

Yes, when we just sit there with one another – we all do this too of course – it is *no small thing*. It is huge. I would name it a sacred thing we do.

*Does it “make a difference” for the one with whom we are sitting?*

Sometimes it is quite clear that it does. We may be told as much. We are thanked. It certainly made a difference for my father. The man with ALS I visited expressed his gratitude, as did other family members. That Old Ship elder thanked me.

But sometimes there may be little or no outward sign that our presence has made any difference at all or even been noticed: A dear one who appears unconscious and cannot respond; or a loved one who will not be able to recall in ten minutes that we had been there. What difference can we have made?

Well, a study recently described on National Public Radio concerning what is called emotional memory has confirmed what I – and perhaps most of you – have long intuited.

A group of folks with very limited short-term memory were shown a sad clip from the film “Forest Gump.” When interviewed an hour later they could not recall the scene or even having viewed any sort of film at all. But they reported feeling unaccountably somewhat sad.

Similarly when shown a funny, happy film clip – an hour later no recall of the film, but reports of feeling cheerful.

When I shared the results of this study with a nurse at a local long-term care facility she was not surprised. She said that following an upbeat musical presentation for example, for the rest of the day the spirit of the place was happier – even though many of the residents could not recall the event.

Yes, our visits to our loved ones, our presence with them, *matters* whether or not they will remember it, even, I believe, whether or not they may appear conscious. Of course our visit, our presence, *matters*.

One way of understanding the poignant dramatic presentation earlier in the service of the scene from the play “Shadow Box” is that it was about two people struggling in the shadow of death to get to the point of simply being able to be present with one another, to just sit there – no more doing necessary.

It is so natural to wish to seize life. We are after all biologically imprinted to resist death, to deny the reality of the approaching death of someone we love... or our own death. And one of our ways of denial is to keep doing – like my brothers and I with the hospital bed.

We understand the poet Dylan Thomas raging against the dying of the light. But it is simply written into the nature of things that the light will die.

Another poet, Walt Whitman, wrote (in *Song of Myself*) in a different tone about life and death:

All goes onward and outward... and nothing collapses,  
And to die is different from what any one supposed, and luckier.  
Has anyone supposed it lucky to be born?  
I hasten to inform him or her it is just as lucky to die, and I know it.  
I pass death with the dying, and birth with the new-washed babe  
.... and am not contained between my hat and boots...

I'm not entirely sure what Whitman means or how he knows or thinks he knows. But I sense wisdom here. We are, each of us, perhaps not only *part of* something larger than can be contained between our hat and boots – but *ourselves* may be larger than can be contained between hat and boots. And indeed when someone dies we may experience not so much a going away, a disappearance, but an expansion of their presence. No longer contained – if ever they really were – between hat and boots, we begin to experience their presence in the next room, the whole house, wherever we go.

I'm not sure what it means. But it, too, is a *presence* that we might be more likely to experience if we don't just do something, but sit there, even or especially at this moment of passage.

This said, we need not wait for this extreme moment, since if we pause and just sit there, any moment with one another can be a moment in which we experience that we are more than meets the eye and that our presence for one another whether in a time of sorrow or joy, suffering or happiness, *is* the most important thing.

Yes, there is plenty to *do* for one another.

Yet may we also remember that a time arises when there is nothing to do, when it is just sitting there that is the most important, indeed, the sacred thing.

So it is. So may it always be.