

“Nurses are heroes: Ask me, I know one!”

A Sermon by Rev. Dr. Jan Carlsson-Bull
First Parish Unitarian Universalist
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One morning when I was about eight years old, I came to the breakfast table to the words, “Oh no!” They were spoken by my Mother in a way that I knew something terrible had happened. Newspaper in hand, tears streaming down her face, she sat across from Dad, with my brother and me between them. She’d made her announcement to no one in particular. I just knew it came from a deep place. It was late May, the season of high school proms all over Iowa, and she had just read of a car accident on a prom night. There were fatalities, among them, a young man whose birth she proceeded to describe. He had been born premature, and it was touch and go.

Mom had been there and hovered along with the other nurses who stood over his tiny form day after day, long into the nights, lending their skills professional and their prayers personal to the effort of keeping this baby alive so that he might grow and thrive. What a celebration it was when this child left for home in his mother’s arms. My Mother had heard later about how well he was doing. She carried that joy and pride in the undercurrents of her memory all the way to the breakfast table that morning, so the news that carried word of this young man’s death – so unnecessary, so before what should have been his time – held a sadness that rose from the love she had poured forth over his infant body so many years before.

Time and again I was reminded growing up of how nursing was core to who my Mother is. She’s a nurturer, a healer, a caregiver, and yes, she can also be pretty bossy. Just a couple of years ago, at the age of 97, she had emergency surgery to have her gall bladder removed. The next day, who was bossing the medical staff around to make sure they did this and not that? My Mom, ever the professional! What has always impressed me is that she is usually right. Just weeks ago, she had a mild stroke, and I went down to Pennsylvania to be with her, at the time not knowing what exactly had happened. Tests were run; more tests were run. “I believe I’ve had a stroke,” she kept saying. No firm diagnosis. Home she went, then back again when all was not quite right. “You’ve had a slight stroke, Lillian,” came the authoritative diagnosis from her doctor. My brother and I learned long ago not to quibble with our Mother’s first instincts. We have grown up in the shining shadow of our Mother, the nurse!

“Bedside Manners” was the title of a sermon to which I was privy in early April, a sermon delivered by my esteemed friend and colleague Forrest Church, for 30 years Senior Minister at New York City’s Unitarian Church of All Souls, where I served as Assistant Minister before coming here to Cohasset. I learned so much from Forrest and continue to. His wisdom resonates more than ever as he lives day by day with the knowledge that his days are limited. Some of you know that in early February, Forrest received the difficult news that the cancer that had visited him a year earlier and which he had thought he had beat, had returned and spread. As I sat once again in the pews of All Souls, I was reminded once again of Forrest’s spirit and grace as he shared in sermon form an adaptation of a chapter of his book to be released by Beacon Press in June: *Love & Death: My Journey through the Valley of the Shadow*. His message of the morning was a lesson, much as sermons long ago were deemed simply “lessons.”

As many times as Forrest had visited congregants in hospitals, he had spent almost no time himself in such an institution. Perspective always quickens when we’re downwind of services

that we customarily have provided ourselves. What to be mindful of when visiting a loved one in such a setting? He offered a number of suggestions, but it was the final one that brought me to my topic this morning.

“Be kind to the nurses,” he counseled. “For one thing, you may very well be in their way, and they have a job to do. But there is another, more important, reason. Your kindness to them will help remind them that what they are doing is more than a job; it is a ministry. ... they remind us that there are people in our bodies. Nurses are heroes.”

Yes, of course, I said to myself. Nurses are heroes. I know one. She gave birth to me; she raised me; she taught me; she still does, modeling as she does remarkable resilience as she continues to honor life in all its fragility, whether at the side of a new-born who might not make it or inside her own heart and mind, attuned to the reality that 99 years take their toll on mobility, eyesight, hearing, and knowledge that one may well not be here next spring.

Nursing and caregiving and parenting and mothering are gifted and laden with attentiveness to how fragile life is and, in my Mother’s words, “how quickly it goes.”

Springtime is redolent with renewal and fragility. One day the sun shines, warm on our shoulders. The next day, a chill returns, making us wonder at the fickleness of the season. Life is new and renewed, but cannot be taken for granted. Mother Earth reminds us in so many ways that life is precious and fragile. My Mother reminds me in so many ways that life is precious and fragile, through the memories that I hold, the lessons she has imparted, and the model she continues to be. On this Mother’s Day I honor her by reminding myself as much as you that once born, it is ours to nurture, to sustain, and to revere life.

Of course, if there was ever to be a Mother’s Day, it must surely illumine the preciousness of life and call us to nurture, sustain, and revere life. Futility and yes, outrage, well up inside us when we observe life cut short by forces that need never have been set in motion – stupid decisions behind the wheel on prom night, perverse policies unleashed by heads of state. Julia Ward Howe, issuing her Mother’s Day Proclamation 138 years ago, knew the fragility of life. How could we possibly know the gift of life, carry life, give birth to children, raise them, love them, and do all in our power to ensure a world worthy of the manifold gifts of full living and then engage in acts of war, the ultimate violation of the miracle of life? Who else to call upon but “women of this day ... all women who have hearts?” Should not mothers cry out for “sons [and daughters too] not to be taken from us to unlearn all that we have been able to teach them of charity, mercy and patience?” It makes manifold sense that this resolute woman would petition other women, so many of them mothers and caregivers, to “take counsel with each other as to the means whereby the great human family can live in peace.”

On this Mother’s Day, I recall my own Mother and honor her as the one who gave birth to me, raised me, nurtured me, and sustains me still. I honor her career as nurse, caregiver, healer, and hero. I honor all who have raised and nurtured children into budding adulthood. I wonder that we dishonor this life affirming-nurturance that is ours to share whether we deem ourselves parents or not by reckless behavior that violates the spirit of precious life. I wonder that we don’t daily gather in counsel, through this faith community and this extended community spiritual and secular, to seed new gardens where we might be there for one another’s children.

One need not be a mother to be a caregiver, a sustainer, a worshipper at the altar of life, precious life. All can be heroes as we rally to Julia’s call, counsel together, and do all that we can

in measures that are life affirming. It is the heart of this day and this time when we honor those who carry life, nurture life, and sustain life. In the spirit of appreciation for the miracle of life and love and the heroes in our midst, Amen.

Sources:

Forrest Church, "Bedside Manners," A sermon given at the Unitarian Church of All Souls, New York City, April 6, 2008, <http://www.allsoulsnyc.org/publications/video/bedside-manners.html>.

Julia Ward Howe, "Mother's Day Proclamation," http://womenshistory.about.com/od/howejwriting/a/mothers_day.htm.