

Reading: Blessing, by Rachel Naomi Remen

From the book, My Grandfather's Blessings

On Friday afternoons when I would arrive at my grandfather's house after school, the tea would already be set on the table. My grandfather had his own way of serving tea. There were no teacups and saucers or bowls of granulated sugar or honey. Instead he would pour the tea directly from the silver samovar into a drinking glass. There had to be a teaspoon in the glass first, otherwise the glass, being thin, might break.

My grandfather did not drink his tea in the same way that the parents of my friends did either. He would put a cube of sugar between his teeth and then drink the hot tea straight from his glass. So would I. I much preferred drinking tea this way to the way I had to drink tea at home.

After we had finished our tea my grandfather would set two candles on the table and light them. Then he would have a word with God in Hebrew.

Sometimes he would speak out loud, but often he would close his eyes and be quiet. I knew then that he was talking to God in his heart. I would sit and wait patiently because the best part of the week was coming.

When grandpa finished talking to God he would turn to me and say, "Come, Neshume-le" Then I would stand in front of him and he would rest his hands lightly on the top of my head. He would begin by thanking God for me and for making him my grandpa. He would specifically mention my struggles during that week and tell God something about me that was true. Each week I would wait to find out what that was.

If I had made a mistake during the week, he would mention my honesty in telling the truth. If I failed, he would appreciate how hard I had tried. If I had taken even a short nap without my nightlight, he would celebrate my bravery in sleeping in the dark.

Then he would give me his blessing and ask the long-ago women in his stories- Sarah, Rachel, Rebekah and Leah- to watch over me.

These few moments were the only time in my week I felt completely safe and at rest....

Sermon: The Sacred Space Between Us
Rev. Tina Simson ~ February 7/8, 2015

I had a grandpa like this. He wasn't Jewish, and he wasn't religious in any fashion, in fact I think he was the first person to introduced me to the word agnostic. He was my father's dad, and as a child I didn't see him very often, maybe only once a year at best. But he became my rock and my savior during a tumultuous time in my life, when I was in my early 20's

We wrote letters to one another every week. I'd travel at least once a month to spend a weekend with him at his home on a small New England lake near Springfield Massachusetts. And he didn't bless me in the same way as the grandpa in the story. I'm pretty sure he never spoke to God. But I knew that in his eyes, I was whole and worthy of love just as I was.

I'd often arrive very late on a Friday night, leaving after work and driving across NY and into Massachusetts. No matter what time I got there, he'd greet me at the door, with a hearty hug so strong it held me up. And then he's take my hands in his and kiss each one and say to me, "you are my blessing"

There was always braided sweet bread on the table, because once I said I liked it. We'd spend the weekend drinking strong coffee and cooking dinner together, playing scrabble, walking around the lake and talking about life; my life, his life. He was my blessing. In each other's presence, we found sacred space.

I believe that blessings are an expression of faith, faith we have in one another and faith we have in life no matter how hard or challenging it becomes. Blessings are a certain kind of relationship where the space between us is a holy place that is charged with gratitude and kindness, where we remember and acknowledge our true nature and worth, a space that strengthens what is whole in one another. By blessing this space, we offer a place of refuge from everything that is not genuine. We enable one another to remember who we are. My grandfather did that for me and it's my hope that together we can learn to do that for each other.

Yet, I think it is sometimes easier to feel more cursed than blessed in this world today. We are surrounded by the failings of our societies, the injustice, racism, hunger, war, and poverty. And in our own lives we struggle with difficult relationships, with loss or illness and with loneliness even in the midst of a busy life

Faced with all this and because it all **seems** so insurmountable, it is hard to imagine that we can have a significant impact on anything. That's why blessing the space between us can be a true act of faith and the only place to start, it is a place we can perhaps have the most impact. And even in this busy, complicated and often tragic world there is a lot of space to be blessed.

Henri Nouwen, Spiritual teacher and theologian writes this.

“When we are thrown up and down by the waves on the surface of our existence, we become easy victims of our manipulative world, but when we continue to hear a deep gentle voice that blesses us, we can walk through life with a stable sense of well-being and true belonging.”

Now I suspect that we as UU's are less able to hear that voice and less comfortable with the idea of blessings. I think we can get caught up defining it as a religious relic we've chosen to leave behind. But it is a practice we can reclaim and define for ourselves. One that can shift the way we experience the world around us.

I also suspect we struggle to believe that we have the authority or right to bless another, or perhaps we simply don't know how to give blessings or even how to receive them. Maybe we don't even know what they are. So let's start there...

Blessings can come to us unexpectedly; they happen as a simple part of living... We all know them...like the first full belly laugh of a baby, like the soft caress of a kitten, or like that deep breath we take on a cold day or the rest at the end of a job well done.

Blessings can also come to us as an intentional act from another person. They don't need to be called a blessing exactly, but we know them as the most significant affirmation we can receive from another; one that touches our heart, that original goodness that lives in each of us.

Now in order to receive a blessing, the first thing we need to do is to notice it and in order to do that we need presence, that ability to stand still for a moment and experience what is around us. To pay attention and allow goodness to flow over us like a warm shower. And above all, we need gratitude, the ability to simply say, "thank-you."

I know it's hard to be present in life, I think we are afraid to stand still because we can get caught up in what is missing in our lives, and so we miss what is being offered.

When another person offers us kindness and affirmation it's important not to be too busy to notice.

We fill our days with stuff. We race from one situation to another. And we have this silly sense that we can waste time by standing still. But standing still is exactly what is needed to receive our blessings, to notice our blessings. And if we are lucky enough to receive a blessing from another, it's not uncommon for us to brush it aside by saying things like,

“Aw shucks, that was nothing, don’t mention it, forget...and so on.” In an effort to be humble we actually discount a generous gift from another.

A wise person once said that our blessings are like planes backed up at an airport, circling around us just waiting to land. We only need to create the flight path and allow them to touch down. So, here’s the tip, to recognize and receive a blessing gracefully is the first step in being able to give a blessing.

I’ve been surprised as a minister in a UU community, just how often I’ve been asked to offer a blessing. There are the usual and expected times, like at a wedding, or the birth of a child. It is common to offer them at a memorial service or burial. And mostly I know what to say at those. There are some good models in the UU hymnal and there are the many books on blessings that offer beautiful suggestions.

But there have been other times I’ve been asked to bless someone or something where all my preparation went out the window and I had very little to guide me except my heart.

One afternoon, an older member of our congregation who is gone now, invited me to his home; his daughter was there too. On the spot he asked me to bless their conversation because he was going to tell her he was gay and he needed her forgiveness for keeping the secret from her for so long.

I didn’t know what to say.

And perhaps the hardest blessing I was asked to confer was for a child waiting for an organ donor, a small boy who was perhaps too sick for the transplant. “Can you bless him before you leave tonight?” his parents asked me. I didn’t know what to say. But a minister is supposed to bless the world, so I said all I knew in that moment, “Now I lay me down to sleep and pray the lord my soul to keep”

I left the hospital room and worried it was the wrong thing to say, I worried its simplicity diminished their struggle. I worried I wasn't worthy enough to confer blessings. I saw the dad the next day at the hospital coffee shop. He came up and thanked me for the blessing. He said they didn't much believe in God, but felt the blessing was perfect and my willingness to do this for strangers meant a lot to him and his family. That's when I realized that it wasn't about being worthy; it was about being willing. Willing to find the light in the darkest of times, willing to speak when there are no right words to say. Willing to see another as whole even when they cannot see or know that about themselves, and willing to find gratitude in the simplest exchange.

We each hold the authority to bless the world, we decide in each moment how we respond to one another. Each moment we have the choice to bless or to curse the world.

The sacred space between us is the most available ground for blessings. It occurs hundreds of times each day. This space is equally available through interactions with loved ones or with strangers. It is the space of conversations with colleagues and friends, with partners, with siblings, with children and parents. It is in the space we graciously allow for the car to merge into our lane, or the shopper to go ahead of us in line. It is the space of civil discourse in political discussions; it is even FaceBook and Twitter.

These are the spaces in our lives where there is ripe opportunity to practice our faith in humanity and choose to bless the world. All it takes is for you to notice, to choose life and love and kindness and to be grateful.

Now what I'm going to tell you is really true because it may seem quite odd, but things like this really do happen...

Last week I went to Wegmans out in Penfield and my cashier's name was Faith. I commented that Faith was our worship theme at church this month. I asked her what it is like to have her name. She said a lot of people ask her this and she's not particularly religious anymore, although her mother was and named her two younger sisters Hope

and Charity. But she saw her name as a blessing; she said, it was a reminder that people are basically good and that faith in humanity was the only true answer to the troubles of the world. I enjoyed our conversation and I felt blessed by the brief space we shared together.

And then this week, I went to Wegmans here at East Ave. I got into a check-out line with my raspberries and chocolate and the cashier and I laughed and chatted a bit about what it takes to survive a Rochester storm. She brushed aside her hair and I saw her nametag; it said...Blessing. I told her I was writing a sermon about blessings and asked what it was like to have her name.

She said, "I never doubted that I was loved or that I was special. Imagine if your mother named you Blessing." Then she said, tell the people at your church that everyone is a blessing and then teach them how to bless each other.

"I will." I said "and thank you"

And so, in honor of Faith and Blessing, we are going to bless one another right now. I want you to relax and take a deep breath; this isn't that hard.

And now silently, face each other, find a partner or two and connect with them. Make sure there is no one left out here, so if there is someone sitting alone go to them, or invite them to come to you. Touch a hand, a shoulder, or a sleeve and look into their eyes.

And now, repeat after me each partner to the other, one at a time

You are a blessing

The light of the world shines in your eyes

May your path be easy

May you find peace in your heart

And may you find rest in the arms of love.

See how easy that was...you have been blessed and as the story tells us,
...once blessed we are forever blessed.

Now go out, accept all your blessings, allow those circling around you to land and fill your heart, let them remind you who you are...and whenever possible, choose to bless the sacred space between us. It is sure to heal the world.

May it be so, and Amen.