

“The Home In the Hallway: Crafting a Spiritual Home Without Walking Through a Door”
Guest Speaker Johannah Murphy
February 5, 2017

The hallways of hospitals can feel like connectors, passageways, and in this way it's easy to see them in a positive light. They connect nurses to patients, patients to doctors, but they also safeguard the unknown, keeping patients behind closed doors, making chaplains wary as they don't always know who they will find, or what state a patient might be in. This has been a learning goal of mine as a chaplain, 'how to get through the door.' During daily rounds, we as chaplains give cold calls, knocking on doors, peeping in and asking if our presence is desired, asking if the patient would like to chat, would like a blessing, would like someone to just sit with them.

Before each knock I am usually flooded with different fears and scenarios, most of which I cannot exactly pinpoint or name. I stand outside the door hesitating to knock, hesitating to begin something I don't know how it will end or if it will. This week I have felt similarly, trapped in a hallway. Trapped in a hallway where there are many doors that our new leader seems to be closing off one after the other, while many try to run and jam a foot in the door, trying to figure out how to keep them open.

While our new leader has been busily signing executive orders that seem to be rapidly threatening the lives of our earth and our people, I, and many around me have started to panic. At the hospital the hallways often frighten me, acting as host to so many doors into the unknown, I have a way in. Many in our country now feel paralyzed. But we are not, we have our authentic selves and the connection and love these selves bring. In these selves, we can stand on the side of love and act to defend it. A standing for love will require us to stand in hard places, we will stand in hallways, let us see these hallways as entry points, connectors, and let us make the hallways our homes by loving whoever enters in, whoever is behind the door even when we can't see them. I am scared, in pain, and angry as many are and that's ok. When I am scared, when I am in pain, I feel vulnerable, and though I may try to step away from this vulnerability, present in it, is a chance to open up, to be gutted, making room for a stronger love, and a stronger way to act on this love.

The other day I walked through a door to find a patient sitting with her hospital gown on the chair beside her bed. She sat calm and composed, her husband sitting across from her, a gold cross hanging prominently against his white t-shirt. She introduced herself to me and began talking about her cancer and impending

surgery with a gentle anxiety, but also with a serenity that demonstrated her acceptance of what was happening to her body.

The visit was short, she told me about her disease, introduced me to her husband, and we all took each other's hands and prayed. We prayed that the love present in the room hold and fill us. She then prayed to Jesus and after the "amens" told me she believed in God and that this God would and had stood by her, a great God that had helped with the healing of many and that she had faith in his capacity to heal her. There is something heartbreaking for me about seeing an expression of faith as strong as hers in the face of the unknown, in the face of despair, in the face of so much hurt already experienced. The heartbreak I feel is not one of loss or sorrow, but instead one that breaks me open, perhaps in an effort to let more faith than I have in. It is a heartbreak that has motivated me to stand more true to myself, more open, more willing to defend others and the love that fills and holds. There is something productive in this heartbreak, a gutting that touches upon our capacities to love.

There was sign at the Women' March in Washington D.C. that quoted Cheryl Strayed, the author of the book *Tiny Beautiful Things*. This book includes entries from her old advice column, *Advice on Love and Life from Dear Sugar*. She writes: "Let yourself be gutted. Let it open you. Start here."

To be gutted doesn't exactly have the most positive connotations, yet I think it's important. I think it's important as so many people are feeling gutted. I think it's important to love so deeply, to want more faith, more love, and more connection, that sometimes you have to be heartbroken to make more room, to make more room for a love you have yet to know. Let yourself be gutted. Let it open you. Start here. And let your vulnerability and heartbrokenness give way to a newfound capacity to love.

I had a similar experience of heart at the women's march. Squashed up against so much humanity with their knitted pink hats, signs, snack packs, and jackets, I teared up. Many times. In part it was I'm sure an emotional response to the reason for the march, a response to my exhaustion for the current moment and the many moments to follow. But I also believe I teared up as I stood gutted, falling in love with strangers, who regardless of their love for me, I couldn't help but fall in love, empty myself out, for a hoped for love, a love I hoped would come back to me.

As a chaplain student, I meet with my group of peers and supervisors twice a week. We often share our stories about patients and in the specific reports we are often

asked to find a metaphor for our experiences. To me, a grizzly bear represents a force of fierceness, protectiveness, and strength. A metaphor of mine from a particular patient was that I felt like a bear wearing a bear suit. To be clear, what I am talking about is a bear wearing a bear suit, so a giant grizzly bear in a giant grizzly bear suit. The metaphor centers on my search for a protective layer in times of vulnerability and how this layer ends up looking similar to the me that already is. I metaphorically put on a bear suit, when I am in fact already the bear. When I am wearing the bear suit, I am not as fierce as when I am not wearing the suite, I do not enter as many doors, I am not in a sense my true self.

True empathy I believes brings about true compassion and true empathy comes from an authentic self. A self that has the capacity to see themselves in relation to others and the connections that bind. When I don't wear the bear suit I have the capacity to relate to patients in a way where in being my true self, I can see how they relate to me and how they are inherently part of me. Then I can defend from not only a place of love, but from a place of love where their destiny is tied to mine. Their destiny whether they be loved ones, strangers, whether they be people have always lived here or people that haven't.

In the realm of chaplaincy, I often serve more as a witness than as someone who takes what they have witnessed and acts on it. But the bear --without the bear suit-- is ready. The bear that stands on the side of love is a bear of fierceness and authenticity that in being this fierce, this authentic, can emphasize in a way that ties others fates to hers and defends them with all the power that is bear. We have more time to just solely rely on standing on the side of love, we must also act. We must act as our true authentic , vulnerable selves, as these are the selves who can face a hallway of closed doors, love who is beyond them, defend them, and rally cry from a place of love.

I don't know how many of you are familiar with Bryson Tiller, but he is a rapper who in a love song raps: Love is not broken it's just not finished. I believe this to be true for our collective love and this in part is what encourages me to authentically love, because our world may be a bit broken, but our love is , it is just unfinished. We have yet to realize our full capacity.

Rev. Fred Smalls in a homily on standing on the side of love preaches:

“Where is our holy church? We are standing on the side of love. Many Unitarian Universalists suffer from a chronic identity crisis. People ask us, what do Unitarian

Universalists believe? And—we freeze! We don't know what to say, because Unitarian Unitarians believe so many things, so many different things. Do we believe in God? Question—simple. Answer—impossible. Define “God.” Define “believe.” Define “we.” Define “in.” Whatever God is or is not, I don't think God cares what we believe. I don't think Jesus cares what we believe. And I know the Buddha doesn't care what we believe. The important question is not what we believe, it's where we stand. I want to be standing on the side of love.”

Rev. Fred Smalls goes on to talk about what exactly it means to stand on the side of love. He talks about activism. He talks about standing up and fighting for same sex marriage, standing up for racial justice, or just standing up to a bully. He ends the sermon with “So when someone asks us what Unitarian Universalists believe, or why we're speaking out on gay rights or immigrant rights or disability rights or human rights, or why we bother to drag our sorry selves down to church on a Sunday morning, let's tell 'em: We are standing on the side of love. We are standing on the side of love.”

Similar to Rev. Fred Smalls and many others, I too, wish to stand on the side of love. I wish to enter and create many hallways and spaces in which people are motivated to stand up for love, to stand on its side, and to defend it. In a more recent Dear Sugar post, one reader asks

Perhaps part of radical empathy is to share in the feelings of someone else even when they are beyond closed doors and to know that though these feelings are not yours, they are still connected, still intertwined in what you have felt and will feel. An interconnection that prompts us to see connection, to defend it, to love it.

So let us go. Leave your bear suits at home and come as the bear you are. Let us go into the hallway where we don't know what is behind each of the doors. Let us go into the hallway and call it home and pledge that no matter who is behind those doors even if they are immigrants, even if they are strangers we have yet to fall in love with, we will start with love. Let us pledge to do this even when we are gutted and crying out as emptiness that has fills us, let us pledge to, as Mary Oliver describes let our “our soft animal of our bodies love what it loves.”