

“Wherever you go, I will go,” May 11, 2014

Rev. Caitlin O’Brien, All Souls UU Congregation, New London, CT

Story for All Ages: BBC video, “Animal Odd Couples” (cat takes in ducklings as her own)

Reading: “All I Really Need to Know, I Learned In Kindergarten” by Robert Fulghum.

One of my first ministerial rites of passage was in the year 2000, when I helped my family bless and say goodbye to our childhood home. The house was built in 1744, so it carried a lot of history from the story of the Revolutionary War to the story of the O’Briens.

We are music lovers in my family, so I made a music mix of all the gorgeous songs that had blasted through that house over the years. We waited til sundown. We covered the kitchen table with tons of candles. With the music playing in the background, each family member took candles and silently put them at the places they wanted to bless. The bedrooms we dreamt in, the table we ate at, the piano we learned on... As I placed a candle where our Christmas trees always were, I saw one of my brothers out the window putting a candle on the pitcher’s mound where he used to play wiffle ball. The whole place was aglow.

We shared readings, too. My sister started us off with the Book of Ruth: **“Wherever you go, I will go. Your people will be my people.”** We loved that house, but we loved each other more. It’s people that matter.

The Hebrew Bible story goes that Ruth and Orpah married Naomi’s sons. So Naomi was Ruth’s mother-in-law. When Naomi’s husband and both sons died, Naomi felt she needed to go back to Judah and eek out a survival plan. It made all the sense in the world for Ruth to do as Naomi said, and return to her own nuclear family for support. But somewhere along the line, Ruth covenanted to ally herself with her mother-in-law.

Something about Ruth’s steadfast commitment to Naomi touches me -- just like the image of those ducks, towering over their foster mom-cat. “I’m stickin’

with you,” they say. “You were there for me.” And so, **“wherever you go, I will go. Your people will be my people.”**

Who are the people you are covenanted with? It may be your nuclear family or, as for Ruth and for the ducklings, it may not be. Who shows up for you and for whom do you show up?

Listen to this unique story about showing up: I was drawn into a piece on NPR about a 23-year-old who was struggling with heroine addiction.¹ His name is Lance. As can happen with addiction, Lance ended up robbing people for money to get drugs.

Nina was one of his victims – he robbed her house. Understandably, she felt violated and angry. The police told her that Lance was arrested for his crime, and that heroine addiction was a big factor. Nina was herself a recovering alcoholic, and so she took an interest in Lance’s situation. She went to his arraignment and ended up reaching out to him, inviting him to her store. Remember, this is someone who broke into her home and took her valuables.

When Lance was on his way to court-mandated rehab, he went to Nina’s store. She gave him a lucky stone and invited him to write her. They ended up exchanging letters almost weekly during his treatment. Since his leaving rehab, Nina has been a lifeline for Lance, helping him to find work, taking him to appointments and recovery meetings, and sharing meals with him.

Listening to Lance and Nina speak, they’re both aware of the precariousness of addiction, how things can turn on a dime, how Nina can’t feel responsible for Lance’s sobriety. For now, it seemed both had become a compass for each other. Someone around whom to orient their days. Someone to do right by. **“Wherever you go, I will go. Your people will be my people.”**

The mother/child relationship that is celebrated today is at its best grounding and uplifting. The world is full of amazing mothers. Praise be to them. Parenting is a very hard job.

And every mother likely knows she’s not perfect (this one included). Every child of a mother comes to know the same.

¹ Brown, Karen. “Heroine Addict Rebuilds A Life With Unexpected Help,” New England Public Radio, March 21, 2014.

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Some of us were mothered with stability, love and patience most of the time. Some of us carry more complex stories into Mother's Day.

And *all* of us benefit from the "mothering" (that is, the grounding and uplifting) that is available to us in relationships of all shapes and sizes. From the friends, whom we might call our "chosen family," who show up and tell us we matter. I know many of you would say that All Souls is a part of your chosen family, and may I say you've chosen well...

Friendship is a lifeline. In fact in a psychology study, it was found that one key game changer for recovery from mental illness was to make a friend. Simple as that. Having "somebody at the [other] end of that telephone."² Someone who says, "you can count on me. That's what friends are for." It's also proven that friendships that go south have the opposite effect on recovery – we aren't surprised, right?

And so it's about the quality of the connection, the covenant that binds you. Don't covenant with just anyone...but do covenant with someone. Be there for them, and let them be there for you.

And what does a healthy covenant look like? I'd say the basics. Like the kindergartner, share (don't withhold), because you get what you give. Play fair – balance your needs with theirs. Clean up your own mess – in a shared living relationship, that may be interpreted literally. In any relationship, it can also mean to **not** project your wounds onto the dynamic. Say you're SORRY when you HURT somebody, and try your best to mean it. Any long term relationship will include hurt. It is how that hurt is healed that defines the health of that relationship. Number 13 from the reading, hold hands and stick together, even when you're mad, and especially when you're scared.

Burned in my brain is this image of Sandy Hook children exiting their building under siege, holding onto each other in a line. Sticking together. *All I ever needed to know, I learned in kindergarten.* No amount of growing up will really explain to them why they had to live through that day, why friends of theirs didn't make it. *No years of maturity will add to the instinct they had to hold onto each other, bless their hearts.*

Tomorrow isn't promised to any of us. So **today**, it's worth taking a look at our

²http://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/content/assets/PDF/publications/strategies_for_living_summary.pdf?view=Standard

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key relationships and asking if we've been operating in covenant with them. Why not sit down with a friend, family member or partner, and ask yourselves, "what do we expect of each other?" Keep it to 4 or 5 things. As Rev Carolyn said last week, our Sunday School classes covenant together, and often have a word they shout when someone is straying from the covenant. This year in youth group, the word is "dharma." Last year, it was "Yahtzee." Shared language is powerful shorthand. It can help us get ahead of a major strain.

And...sometimes the strain runs very deep. When I ran a domestic violence shelter, I heard of many relationships that were unredeemable. There **are** people you need to walk away from and not look back. And there are dynamics between people that serve neither person.

But what of the ordinary failings that accumulate and distance us from one another?

Because here's the thing: *generally speaking, people are really and truly annoying.* People are flawed. They forget what you asked of them. They're not good drivers like you are. They don't sweat the details like you do, or maybe they freak out too much about details. They have bad breath, bad manners, bad taste in music. They use the last piece of toilet paper and don't replace the roll. They over-talk or under-contribute. They run late all the time, or they're fed up with *your* lateness.

They don't know what to say *when you need them to say the perfect thing.* And they **aren't always thinking about you.** No, they aren't always thinking about you.

What makes relationships even harder is – friends, I have news for you: **you're** really annoying, too – and you have a handful of traits that others have to tolerate in you. And maybe your loved ones have slipped on that. And so the covenant gets strained.

Resentments accumulate, we feel unseen or unheard, and along the way, we pull away in tiny ways that you could *barely* notice if you weren't looking for it. But these distances expand and get harder to bridge. And where does that leave us?

This year, we've offered a handful of ways for you to write down and post a loss that you hold, and Reverend Carolyn, Rebecca and I have been moved to

realize how many of you miss someone, **someone who is not gone**, but whose covenant with you has been strained. Many of you feel this way.

There are some ties that are best left severed, or maybe just for a time. And then there are ties that are worth the effort to restore. That's for **you** to work out, of course, distinguishing which is which. If Rev. Carolyn, Rebecca or I can be of support to you in that reflection process, we would be honored to walk with you.

For now, might I recommend you ask yourself those simple kindergarten questions: did *I* share and play fair? Did I say sorry or clean up my own mess? Did I hold hands and stick together? The simple things are often the hardest, especially if you feel you've been wronged.

People: ya can't live with 'em, can't live without 'em. We know we're generally better off with company. We've known it since **before** kindergarten. The barn cat and ducklings knew it. Nina and Lance knew it, Ruth and Naomi knew it, and you know it about the ones you love. And because the ones you love are also the ones who will let you down, it helps to covenant, and to revisit the covenant when the road gets rocky.

Because you know what Stephen Sondheim meant when he wrote about...

Someone to need you too much.
Someone to know you too well.
Someone to pull you up short,
And put you through hell,
And give you support for being alive

Someone you have to let in,
Someone whose feelings you spare,
Someone who, like it or not,
Will want you to share
A little, a lot
Of being alive.

It's a dance. And there are days we want to sit it out, days when maybe we should sit it out. But more often than not, we should dance, and let ourselves be accompanied, encouraged, irritated, and expanded by someone else. Let ourselves be supported in being alive.

Please rise in body or in spirit to sing “Let it be a Dance,” #311