

“To Be In Need”  
Sermon by Sharon Wylie  
For the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Marin in San Rafael, CA  
July 17, 2011

I'd like to talk to you this morning about asking for help. About letting people know when we are in crisis, in trouble, in need. I want us to talk about what it takes to let people into our suffering, what it takes to ASK for support, and what it takes to ACCEPT what is offered.

Because it's not easy, we know. It is SADLY true that many people WITHDRAW from church community during times of crisis and struggle. Ministers and pastoral care committees KNOW that sudden church absence can be a sign of personal crisis. And it's completely understandable, of course. Animals hide pain; it is a survival mechanism. When we are at our most vulnerable—when we have lost a job, have suffered a death, or have decided to end a relationship—it makes sense that we turn to our closest friends and family, and that we hunker down at home a little bit. That's a way we take care of ourselves.

But it's also true that the dominant culture has grown intolerant of vulnerability. Communal grieving customs that used to provide protection and support for families after a death have disappeared. We are expected to return to work quickly after a crisis. Crying in public is...what?...shameful? ignored? taboo perhaps? When the grocery clerk asks, “How are you today?” you are expected to say, “Fine!” or “Good!” or “Can't complain!” not “My life is falling apart, actually, and I'm just trying to keep it together long enough to buy this tub of ice cream.”

I wonder how many people here have ever cried in the bathroom at work or

some other public place.

So, it's not that we don't NEED more support. It's that we're pressured not to ask for it. I know from my own experience AND from my own observation that most of us draw the circle of support much, much smaller than is good for us. And here's my story about that.

In March of 2007 I learned that my family's construction company was going to close. At that time, I had been working there over nine years, as an administrative assistant, then as an assistant project manager, and finally, a project manager, managing my first construction project. The company had existed before I was born, it is where I grew up, I'd gone there every day after school and on the weekends while my parents worked, I'd had my first paying job there, and worked there several summers during college. I had thought I would work there the rest of my life.

The news that we would be closing was devastating to me. My entire vision of my future, my life, was gone. I was glad to know I had TIME to figure out what to do next—it was going to take a couple of years to finish our projects and close our doors—but still, my life as I knew it was over.

I cried, and went home early that day, and called my partner. And that was all. I didn't really see the point of telling my friends about it right away. They would ask me what I was going to do next, and I didn't know. Nothing was going to happen right away. And I didn't want to talk about it until I felt I had a handle on what I was feeling. I certainly didn't want to talk about it if I might end up crying in

front of people.

So I just went about my life, business as usual, holding back tears sometimes, but mostly putting on a façade that everything was fine. And everything WAS fine, except that I had broken out in a rash on my arms and legs. “Great!” I thought, “like I don’t have enough going on right now!”

I ignored the rash for a week that included the first round of layoffs from the company, but when the rash didn’t go away by a second week, I went to my doctor. This was 12 days after I’d first been told the company would close. My doctor asked, “Have you changed your eating habits?” No. “Have you changed your soap or detergent?” No. “Have you bought any new clothes or sheets?” No. And then she asked, “Are you under any stress?” I burst into tears.

I described my grief over the closing of the company, and she asked me who I had told, who I had asked for support. And when I told her “just my partner,” she told me I needed to start talking to my friends about what I was going through. THAT was my prescription. That’s all.

The next morning I sent a vague email to some friends, letting them know I was under a lot of stress I didn’t feel ready to talk about, but asking for their prayers and support nonetheless. I felt the love in their response to me. It would be almost another week before I could bring myself to TELL SOMEONE what was actually going on, before I could let myself accept the love and support that was available to me.

So when I tell you that I know it’s hard to ask for help, I mean it.

And when I tell you that when we don't ask for help, there is a cost to us, body and soul, I mean that too.

According to WebMD, "Stress can wreak havoc on your health. It has been linked to a number of health problems, including depression and anxiety, sleep disorders, headache, high blood pressure, heart disease, obesity and more. Stress can affect your skin by aggravating skin problems.... Stress can also affect your hair and nails."

And the Mayo Clinic reports that a social support network made up of friends, family, and peers provide a sense of belonging, an increased sense of self-worth, and a feeling of security. "Research shows that those who enjoy high levels of social support stay healthier and live longer."

Like many of you, I often look to the natural world for INSPIRATION and for INFORMATION. And this topic got me thinking about what happens to plants under stress. I found a website called "Gardening Know How Dot Com." And it had a wonderful list of things to do to help plants SURVIVE shock and distress. This is what jumped out at me.

"Disturb the roots as little as possible. The more roots that come with the plant [when it's being moved or disturbed,] the less likely shock will set in."

Disturb the roots as little as possible.

When I refused to reach out to my friends in my time of hurt and crisis, I let myself be moved AND disturbed without bringing my roots with me, without bringing my friends along with me in my hurt and confusion. Our roots keep us

anchored and grounded. Our roots keep us nourished. Our roots prevent erosion, that process of being worn down.

Now, root systems are complex. There are primary roots, secondary roots, specialized roots. You know if you've ever looked at a plant's root system, there are hundreds and thousands of roots. Big strong roots, and fine little roots. The more roots spreading in all directions, the healthier the plant.

The rash on my skin was my soul crying out for the loss of its roots. Crying out for the absence of multiple sources of nourishment. Crying out for a system of love and support to keep me anchored. I had thought my partner and my family were enough, but I've learned there IS NO ENOUGH when it comes to love and friendship. There is no enough. There is room for hundreds and thousands of roots.

The poet says, "Dear children, you must try to say Something when you are in need. Don't confuse hunger with greed; And don't wait until you are dead."

I thought I didn't NEED to talk about my grief because, after all, what was anybody going to do about it? Nobody could change what was happening. I confused my hunger for support with a greed to keep my life from changing. A dear friend of mine is fond of saying, "It's not 'needy' to have needs."

I had always prided myself on my strength, my autonomy, my ability to handle my own problems. And I somehow thought that telling my friends I was having a hard time would somehow undermine my strength, my autonomy, my ability to handle my own problems.

Now I know different. We don't need friends to solve our problems for us. We

don't even need friends to DO things for us, though that can be helpful in times of turmoil. No, we just need friends because WE NEED FRIENDS. We need friends the way we need air, the way we need water, the way we need sleep. The way plants need roots.

And we need MANY friends. Primary friends, secondary friends, specialized friends. Big strong friends, and fine little friends. The more friends spreading in all directions, the healthier the soul.

I have always had individual friends, but joining a church is the first time of my adult life that I've had GROUPS of friends. The four people I turned to in my time of crisis over my family's company closing were co-leaders with me of a group at my home congregation in San Diego. When I emailed that first person, finally telling someone what was going on with me, within MINUTES of hitting "send" I had a phone call from ANOTHER person in that same group. She pretended she was calling me about something else, but it was clear to me—and it was okay with me—that my news had travelled fast. My community was ready and willing to hold me in my time of hurting. And I felt held and supported in a way I never had before.

Now one of the first things I ask people who are in crisis, people who are grieving, people who are coping with illness...I ask about their support system. Who do you cry with? Who do you laugh with? Who is your community? Because this is what makes the difference in the ability to survive and thrive.

When I mentioned to one of you that this would be a sermon topic, I was asked to talk about HOW to ask for support. I don't think there's a completely easy

way. It's hard. It's hard to ask for help. My suggestion is to name what you are feeling and to name what you want. "I feel anxious. I would like someone to listen while I talk." "I feel sad. I would like to go see a funny movie with you." "I feel alone. I would like a friend."

Name what you are feeling and name what you want.

And THEN you have to say, "I'm not looking for advice." Because most of us have a strong temptation to give advice to people in crisis. I think it's often because we don't always know what else to say. And I know that that can be really aggravating, to be lonely or sad or anxious and to have someone try to tell you what you should be doing. So you all need to hear please DON'T give advice to people in crisis. I really mean it. Unless they specifically ask. Even if you think it's really great advice. And you all also need to hear, it's okay to say, "I'm not looking for advice." It's okay to set that boundary.

Name what you are feeling and name what you want.

There are many ways to develop support systems. The Mayo Clinic recommends meeting people through volunteer work, joining a gym, taking a class, and looking online. I was disappointed that they didn't list finding a religious community. Social support is one of the reasons MOST of us look for religious community. In fact, many people look for and find churches after a time of stress and loss in their lives, like death or a divorce. Many of our first-time visitors have suffered a personal crisis in the preceding year.

Congregations aren't the ONLY social support available, of course, but I

think we offer more than a gym or a class or the internet. We're a place where people of shared values come together to consider what has meaning for us. We make commitments to each other. We take action together. We learn together. And in times of struggle and loss, we are a place besides home to hunker down for a while.

My experience is that asking a group of people for support feels very different from asking an individual. And the surprise is...I think it's easier. I think it's easier to ask a group, and I think it's easier for a group to respond. I think this is part of why sharing our joys and sorrows is such a beloved part of so many Unitarian Universalist congregations. When there are multiple people being asked for support, then there is a shared responsibility that feels much lighter than when one person is asked.

Since my time of crisis years ago, I have become something of a glutton for communal support, really good at naming what I'm feeling and asking for what I what. In seminary, I organized weekly check-in groups, multiple study groups, a blessing ritual for those of us pursuing ministry, and a support group for those of us searching for internships at the same time.

And in April of last year, I called together a different four friends to help me hold something like a memorial service for my family's company, which had finally closed its doors. I talked about my family and our accomplishments and my grief, and I cried, and I laughed, and I showed pictures and told stories. Because it's not needy to have needs. Because we must say something when we are in need. Because

we shouldn't confuse hunger with greed, and we shouldn't wait until we are dead.

Blessed be.

### BENEDICTION

May we be nourished by the roots of family and friends.

May we be anchored.

May we be held.

May we have the courage to ask for help.

And may we have the courage to receive it.

Amen and blessed be.