**Bandaids, Chicken Soup, and other Wonder Drugs**

**The poet Edna St. Vincent Millay wrote,**

**Love is not all; it is not meat nor drink,**

**Nor slumber nor a roof against the rain;**

**Nor yet a floating spar to men that sink**

**And rise and sink and rise and sink again;**

**Love cannot fill the thickened lung with breath,**

**Nor clean the blood, nor set the fractured bone;**

**Yet many a man is making friends with death**

**Even as I speak, for lack of love alone.**

**These lines are no poetic hyperbole. Because it’s now medically established that people need love, much as they need food and hydration. Consider the numbers. Individuals who are single, separated, widowed or divorced are two to three times more likely to die during any given week or month than their married peers. A California study discovered that people who lack pals and partners are at higher risk for illness, and that individuals who are plugged into their community tend to live nine years longer, on average, than their socially isolated peers. When another poet, W.H. Auden, wrote “Love or Perish,” he was just making a clinical diagnosis. A disconnected existence can be hazardous to your health.**

**Confirming the vital role of companionship, a variety of research now suggests that attending church or synagogue or participating on other religious organizations has physical and emotional, as well as spiritual pay-offs. Controlling for other variables like smoking and drinking, where the Mormons have us beat, it’s still the case that attending Sunday services like ours has about the same benefit as regular exercise or visiting the gym … and you don’t even work up a sweat! People who participate in faith communities report being happier and are less subject to mood swings and depression than their non-religious counterparts. They’re at lower risk for suicide. They have stronger immune systems, better pulmonary function, and longer life expectancies. “Fellowship is life and lack of fellowship is death.” Or to turn-around the words of the famous philosopher Jean Paul Sartre, “Health is other people.”**

**Explaining why others matter so much is the hard part, veering into that mysterious link between mind and body. Harvard psychologist Robert Ornstein speculates that “somehow interaction with the larger social world of others draws our attention outside of ourselves, enlarges our focus, enhances our ability to cope, and it seems to make the brain reactions more stable and the person less vulnerable to disease.” But I think the explanation may be simpler, going back to such homely remedies as Chicken Soup (or I would make it veggie soup) a broth with no proven therapeutic dosage but which can, when administered with a kind word, do wonders for a cold. This is also the principle behind band-aids, which as every parent knows have little power to heal a scraped knee, but when accompanied with a kiss and a hug, can miraculously comfort a crying child. We’re wrong to belittle such homemade nostrums or to suppose that the experts and clinicians offer something more or better. For love contains properties that make it the most powerful medicine on earth. A touch, a glance, a thoughtful gesture, a smile can make the difference, literally, between life and death.**

**Even the affection of an animal can work wonders. I remember, for example, the story that Steve Reiman told. Steve is the director of a Therapy Dog outfit who spends his time visiting various pediatric wards with his corps of canines. In one room that he entered lay a young girl in a coma, a teenager, helicoptered into the hospital from out of state. For five days, she’d been unconscious, after an aneurysm had burst inside her brain.. Nothing the doctors tried could bring her back life. Then, with the mother’s permission, Steve let his animals go to work. One of the German Shepherds climbed right into bed with the girl and parked himself down flop across her chest. Maybe it was the miracle dog slobber that did it, or just the warmth and weight of that friendly, furry pooch. But slowly, the girl’s arms that had been motionless and unresponsive for so long lifted up into the air and circled around that great big mutt. And within a few minutes, she was awake again, smiling and talking with her mom. Somehow, pure puppy love had accomplished what modern medicine failed to do.**

**So if an animal can make such a difference to another person, then probably you can, too. Because helping really isn’t the exclusive province of “helping professionals” and “ministry” isn’t confined to ordained clergy. Ministry is simply how we show compassion and express our support for one another, and that’s everybody’s job. When people are considering a decision whether to join our congregation, I often tell them that becoming part of a Unitarian Universalist church or fellowship is like becoming part of an adoptive family … not a family defined by blood or gender or genes or other superficials, but a family organized around the principle of mutual care and respect, a family where you belong, whatever mistakes you might have made, or however you might have messed up, where you belong just by virtue of being human.**

**And yet families of all kinds are under increasing stress these days. The bonds we traditionally relied on in times of trouble have gotten stretched and frayed. Home, said Robert Frost, is the place that, when you have to go there, they have to take you in. But more and more, many people have no home, no reliable support network. A study released in the American Sociological Review a few years ago found that a quarter of all Americans—25%--say they lack even one other person whom they can talk to about important personal issues. Over half say they have just one person (usually a spouse) who’s the single lifeline they can depend on. That’s a huge drop from the last time the study was conducted in the 1980’s. Suggesting that America is rapidly becoming a land of relative strangers, of people who don’t know or trust each other, in a word, a land of people who don’t have friends.**

**And that’s where congregations like ours come in. Churches are a little like community mental health centers, a little like free clinics. Except there’s no distinction between the care providers and the clients here. We’re all in this helping business together, whenever we come together to lessen the distance that separates you and me, to bridge our estrangement, to simply be present with one another. We build those bridges in our Sharing Circles, and in the choir, in dinners for eight and the men’s and women’s group. And we also do it with our Care Community, which you’ll hear more about later this morning, which organizes hospital visits and rides to the doctor and other forms of TLC. All ways we try to live out our covenant: “to engage each other with respect, compassion and generosity in all our endeavours.”**

**Ralph Waldo Emerson, in an essay on Friendship, wrote that “We have a great deal more kindness than is ever spoken.” And it’s true. So many kind words remain unsaid, so many good intentions go unfulfilled, so many relationships languish untended that might have brought a little joy into the world. And it doesn’t take much: a note, a phone call, word of condolence can make all the difference when we’re feeling hurt or alone. It makes me think that this might be the moment to share those words of tenderness and endearment, not to postpone love or defer intimacy or happiness, but to realize it and act on it, here and now.**

**Together we can become that beloved community we dream about, a place where all can feel accepted, all experience dignity, where eyes light up in recognition when we enters the room, “where there are people to whom we can speak with passion without having the words catch in our throats … arms to hold us when we falter. A circle of healing. A circle of friends.” As the poet writes,**

**Love is not all: it is not meat nor drink**

**Nor slumber nor a roof against the rain …**

**Yet many a man is making friends with death**

**Even as I speak, for lack of love alone.**

**It well may be that in a difficult hour,**

**Pinned down by pain and moaning for release,**

**Or nagged by want past resolution's power,**

**I might be driven to sell your love for peace,**

**Or trade the memory of this night for food.**

**It well may be. I do not think I would.**