

## “Full, Reclined, Locked Position: An Auction Sermon”

*“Here is the world; beautiful and terrible things will happen.*

*Be not afraid.*

*Because this is what we are about:*

*We hold hope for each other when hope is hard to find.*

*We plant seeds that will one day grow.*

*We are prophets of a future not our own.*

*We cannot do everything,*

*But we can do something.*

*So forget your perfect offering.*

*There is a crack in everything.*

*That is how the light gets in.”*

We begin this morning with many thanks to Gary Strichartz (stand and wave)

Who bought this sermon more than a year ago at last year’s auction,

He paying just nearly, just barely the union rate for such services,

Which if we break it down to an hourly rate would be enough to get Bernie

Sanders advocating on our behalf,

But I digress....

Gary, who has spent a career as a research scientist in the area of palliative care,

But who demonstrated that it’s never too late to reinvent oneself and

Walk down a new path when he decided,

while still working at Harvard Medical School,

To enter Andover Newton Theological School and eventually

Earn an M. Div (which he did in 2014),

Seek ordination as UU minister, which he is in the midst of,

And serve as a hospital chaplain...

Gary, who in addition to myself and Heather,

Held the hand of UUAC Judy Maguire before she died several weeks ago,

And Mike Healy before he died several weeks ago....

Gary who is a partner to me in our shared pastoral ministry,

And also someone who has supported me over the years...

Including one Sunday years and years ago, when I first started here

And was, to be honest, so unsure of myself,

Which he picked up on and told me downstairs

In Unity Hall – ‘hey Nathan, don’t worry...

*We love you, ok?’* (remember Gary?)...

And Gary, who now more than two months ago, met with me early one

Wednesday morning to talk about this sermon,

Which he followed up with an email, writing:

*Nathan, we human beings are attentive to ordering the world around us so*

*That we explain and predict much of what shapes our lives.*

*We approach the world in a mode that is designed to find meaning*

*And to guide us.*

*But my question for the sermon is: does that mode serve us well*

*When chaos intrudes, when terrible things happen?*

*What are the practices of our faith that give us strength*

*And comfort when the awful parts of our awesome existence*

*Loom over us? What helps us cope?*

Gary, who remember now, asked these questions of me

Weeks and weeks before we as a community entered March

Together when so many sad things seemed to happen in our midst,  
And out in the world, too,  
Which is why, even though I'm not normally superstitious,  
I am so glad to see April come,  
Not least because it meant we could send out our April Fools weekly email,  
Which promised a dog in the pulpit today rather than me.  
Be honest: Who's disappointed that isn't happening?

But now that you've got me anyway:

*What helps us cope? What helps us make and shape meaning in an uncertain World?*

*What are the practices of our faith that give us strength and comfort?*

Good questions, yes?

Yes, so good that I read them again before I went to sleep last Sunday night,  
Easter service over, Jesus risen and off to Heaven, which I am prepared  
To believe just in case,

Two memorial services past, and one still to plan for,

My dad just out of the ICU from a recent bout with pneumonia...

Good grief, when will this month be over?

When my calendar reminds me that tomorrow morning, Monday,

I am scheduled for my sixth month dental cleaning and exam

At 8a.m. in the morning.

Oh joy.

Note to self that what doesn't help one cope is spending part

Of one's day off in a dentist's chair having your teeth scraped.

But off I go, because this smile doesn't just happen on its own.

*'Morning Nathan!'* says Carol, with unreasonable cheer,  
Telling me that Erin, who normally cleans my teeth  
And exhibits a mood more appropriate to the work at hand,  
Is off that day.  
And because I've been going to this practice for years,  
And because somewhere in my records it is written down  
What I do for work,  
And because Carol must believe that I love to talk about religion  
All the time, even when she has her fingers in my mouth...

No sooner than I sit in the chair,  
And she tilts me back in the full, reclined, locked position,  
And hands me the clear wrap around safety glasses (why??),  
And pulls back my cheek with one rubber finger,  
And put a sharp prong against my incisor,  
Does she ask: *"do you think that if every kid in the suburbs  
Was asked why they get Good Friday off they would even know  
What Good Friday is?"*

*"HJLKJFMMMB..."* I mumble.

*"I mean,"* she goes on, *"it's such a shame, isn't it?  
Don't you think it's a shame? Don't you think we need to teach religion more?"  
You can rinse..."*

*"Well, you know,"* I say, *"there is a lot more religious diversity these days in our  
communities; not everyone is Christia..nnnbshdnkkk..."*

But I don't quite get the last part of that sentence out because she has  
Put back into the full, reclined, locked position again,

Finger in mouth, scraping.

*“Well, if we’re going to celebrate Easter we need to talk about Easter.*

*I mean, it’s about spreading the word, isn’t it? Isn’t that what we’re supposed to do?*

*You can rinse...”*

*“Um, well, it depends,”* I say. Which is a lame response, right? And I’m a professional.

Back to the full, reclined, locked position.

*“What does Easter even mean?”* Carol asks. *“Why do we call it Easter?”*

Ah- ha! I know this one. I raise my hand.

*‘Godff oghff fertilit...ljgljgh.....!’* I mumble around her rubber index finger.

She pulls her hands out.

*“God of fertility; it’s Pagan,”* I say, as I see her eyes get wide, real wide.

*“I just talked about this yesterday,”* I say.

*“You can rinse”* says Carol,

Before she puts me back in the full, reclined, locked position.

All quiet now, she is. All quiet.

Which gives me time to reflect. Isn’t this how talk of religion often goes?

*Who believes what? Why don’t they believe this?*

*Don’t you think we they should do this? Shouldn’t religion be about this*

*And not that? What does this mean? What does that mean?*

*Easter means what????”*

Notice with me the hunger for facts, for form, for order.

Notice the parallel to Gary’s words I shared before –

*We humans seem attentive to ordering the world around us*

*So that we can know, explain, and predict what shapes our lives.*

Notice, too, how hard it is to come up with answers to things like this

When your life, never mind the dental hygienist, puts you in

A full, reclined, locked position,

Because of some unforeseen calamity, some unprepared for pain.

*Do you, like me, mumble explanations when your life has got you titled back,*

*Begging you to explain?*

Back to the seminary dentist chair.

And now it's Dr. Sun's turn, who is stepping in for my regular doctor

Who is also out today.

*"Good morning Reverend,"* she says.

*Oh good lord,* I say to myself.

*"Nathan's fine,"* I say,

Before she tilts me back into what...yes, *a full, reclined, locked position.*

*How's Ella?* She says, but with consideration, because she waits to put

Her fingers in my mouth so I can answer,

*'She's really well; braces now!'* I say,

Her question a reference to that last time she saw her, several years ago,

When I brought my daughter into the dentist for what supposed to be a regular check-up,

But that turned into a terrible torture session that ended in an unforeseen,

Unplanned for, but necessary pulled tooth.

*'Oh, I remember that day,'* says Carol, her first words spoken since

The Easter revelation.

And now so do I.

Carol is *that* Carol.

Carol is the Carol who came streaming into the room when

Dr. Sun asked for help,

And with me on one side and her on another,

Held each of Ella's hands as she was tilted back into the

Full, reclined, locked position...

Tears of fear, tears of hurt, but Carol and I

Trading back and forth the blessings:

*you can do this, we're here, it's ok, honey, oh, I know it hurts,*

*It's almost over, breathe, breathe, squeeze my hand, squeeze*

*Out all the pain....*

*What are the practices, asks Gary, that give us comfort when the  
Awful parts of our awesome existence loom over us?*

And is it enough to answer: Company. Fellowship. Presence.

Blessings. Held hands. Stickers and sugar-free lolly pops on the way out?

Because while I'm pretty confident that Carol and I would thrash it out

Over God-talk and church-talk,

I'm also pretty confident that when in the full, reclined, locked position

Carol and I share this: we try, despite all the fear and loathing, all

The disagreement and mumbled explanation, to love.

It's never enough, but it is.

So what helps us Cope, Gary?

Can I suggest, Gary, that that might be the wrong question?

Because the question isn't *what* helps us cope. The question is *who*.

Who helps us cope? *We* help us cope. You. You . You. You.

On Thursday evening my last appointment before heading home  
Was a visit to Jim and Sabrina, who as many know lost their son  
Kyle two weeks ago, and who had at that point only been to our  
Church 2 or 3 times,  
And barely know anyone here.

I went because I know that one of the hardest times after a loss  
Are the days and weeks after the memorial,  
After the family has left, after the casseroles have been frozen in the fridge,  
After everyone seems to be going back to their routine,  
And we are left so often feeling alone.

So I went to see them, no form, no explanations, no predictions  
For what comes next, but simply – to continue a sermon from weeks ago,  
To Show Up.  
And this they asked that I tell us: how they couldn't believe how this congregation  
Has shown for them, are helping them cope  
Here in this terrible time of being fully locked back and rocked back by loss.  
“Thank you,” they said, over and over.

Which reminds me of something I did hear in actual seminary,  
But that has taken the practice of ministry to learn,  
And which you know, Gary, because this is what you see in your chaplaincy.  
That belonging matters more than belief, that faith is something we do with our  
bodies more than our minds,  
That God is a verb and not a noun.

This I believe – then when we stop trying to give a response to each other,  
And instead try to be a response to each other,  
Our true UU faith will shine.  
As it has. As it does. As it will,  
As we lift each other back into a full, upright, and unlocked position.  
Amen.