

Where do we go for Comfort? What do we really need?

Sermon for October 23, 2005

by the Reverend Lone Jensen

We live in chaotic and dangerous times. Ok, I suppose that humans have always said that ever since we developed language. Surely Stone Age men and women after a long day hunting saber tooth tigers and mammoths sat around the fire and said: These are dangerous times! They were right since they could themselves easily have become dinner! I am daily reminded that we still have those cave woman genes, adrenalin flooding our bodies even though saber tooth tigers are in short supply these days. We may only be watching someone on TV who is in danger. But our Stone Age bodies do not know the difference.

We can't say these are the worst of all times. But I will say that 2005 has been a banner year when it comes to natural disasters. The year began with the catastrophic Tsunami and was followed by a Pandora's Box full of disasters. Want to be real scared this Halloween? Just watch the weather channel!

You name it we have had it: fires, drought, floods, mud slides, hurricanes, earth quakes and the fear of pandemic bird flu. Add to this the man made disasters of famine and wars, the sense

of a world gone mad, bombings and terror and it is no wonder that we feel somewhat less than secure. Some of you may remember an old commercial where the punch line was: it is not nice to fool Mother Nature! Well that Mama must not be happy lately! In Chinese mythology all this weather would be caused by dragons raising up their ragged backs of mountain ranges and crumbling villages as if they were nothing but the building block we played with as children. In Yoruba mythology the whirlwind and hurricane Goddess is called Oya and she is most of all unpredictable. God in the Hebrew Bible speaks to poor Job out of the whirlwind and gives him no decent answer. Disasters are neither God's will nor our punishment. The world is dangerous and chaotic place blessed with sparks of love and beauty.

Our home is a fragile blue planet spinning through space. Safety is an illusion. With Oya's latest incarnation Wilma we have gone through the entire alphabet of hurricanes names and it is not even November yet.

Against this cosmic chaotic backdrop, the stage curtain if you like, we play out our own lives. It is hard to be reminded so vividly of our own fragility. The constant disaster news, even when it does not affect us directly, wears on our souls, and can make us fearful, sleepless, tired or just numb. To show compassion, and the word compassion fatigue is being bandied

about a lot lately, we have to have something to give from. One cannot draw water from an empty well. And when our personal lives are struck, as we all will be sooner or later, with illness or loss against a background of world chaos, well what can we do to restore our hope and peace to our souls? Where can we find comfort? And what do we really need?

This is the question for this Sunday. Every one of you here will have a slightly different answer and I invite you to listen and see what holds true for you. This is my truth, it may not be yours. Take what you can use and let go of the rest. That is one reason we worship together. We need each other to touch the holy.

When I say comfort I mean spiritual comfort. As nice as a reclining chair may be, and as wonderful as a massage can feel, or as relaxing as a hot bubble bath can be, all sources of body nurture and child like joy, they can only open your mind or heart to comfort by relaxing the body. What your mind or heart is open to is another matter. We live in a culture of escapism, and the same things and experiences that give us comfort can also make us avoid the encounter with what is really going on in our souls. Too much comfort food, too much empty television, too much “fruity with a woody overtone” red wine, too much of almost anything good can in itself become the problem. I am not suggesting that you should never escape. God knows that there are times when all I want is a

good mystery novel and some Swiss chocolate. But I am saying that you cannot without consequences forever avoid the encounter with your inner self. You cannot deny forever the reality of unavoidable pain, the denied passion buried under layers of obligations nor silence the nagging voice that whispers in your ear that there must be more to life than this,. The escape itself can become the problem as it is with any addiction.

Where do we go for real comfort?

Not to Las Vegas! I did go there this summer for the very first time ever. It was what I expected, a magician's box of illusions, oddly disappointing in its glitter and nothing real at all. Neil Postman writes: *It is a city entirely devoted to the idea of entertainment, and it proclaims the spirit of a culture in which all public discourse increasingly takes the form of entertainment. Our politics, religion, news, athletics, education and commerce have been transformed into show business largely without protest. The result is that as a people we are on the verge of amusing ourselves to death.*

I hope he is wrong but I fear he may be partly right. Silence has become a rare treasure. And yet it is in the silence we may find what we really need. When we rest in the deep silence where our beating heart can be heard, where our own breath becomes the only sound, we may hear the small still voice of God. Or we may

find that our own separateness is an illusion. But first we must be silent. And how hard that can be!

We learn as children where to go to find solace and trust. I had plenty of silence as a child, probably a bit too much. It was another world then with radio noise but little else. It was a world where inner darkness was not denied, where it was at times even celebrated. It was after the war and its ghosts seemed to linger in my parent's memory. I was a painfully shy, fearful and very lonely child who clung to my teddy bear to the point where he had hardly a single hair left. Comfort was my grandmother lap and when she began to forget my name it seemed as if God herself had left me. The night she died I went outside and stood in the garden, under an apple tree hung heavy with fruit for it was August. I stood under that tree and reached my arms toward the autumn sky and the stars and called her name. Somehow I felt she must still be there in the rustling of the leaves and the silent gleam of a thousand stars. Nature, our interdependent web, the sense of being part of it all, even my own smallness gave me then and still gives me great and reliable comfort. I become as Emerson wrote nothing but "a transparent eyeball." We are part and parcel of this web, hallelujah!

Since then both my parents have died and I am next in line to become an ancestor. Somehow this is also comforting to be part

of a long tradition, to know who I am. It comforts me also to be part of a long line of Unitarian and Universalist ministers. There is strength in being part of something greater than your self.

When you see me up here you may find it hard to believe that a part of me is still painfully shy. All my life I have done a very human dance between loneliness and love. Come closer, oh but I need to be alone. The shy young girl is still there hiding even as I love being with people. To not be alone when we are in need is a great blessing. To know when to say enough, I need to be alone now, is still hard.

No one should have to suffer alone unless it is by choice. It is a privilege and comfort to be present with others in sacred moments, a midwife to their joy and pain. And I am immensely grateful to those who have sat with me in such moments. For this I know deep in my bones: we need each other when we are in pain. And equally we need each other when we have a joy to share. I find comfort in this congregation, in coming to church on Sunday, no matter how tired I am. To be part of creating a beloved community where many can find comfort is one of the reasons I went into ministry.

But it is not the only reason. I am a mystic. Or at least I used to be. I want to touch the holy. To do that I thought I must make an empty space for God to enter into my life. Lately I have not

taken the time and space to open the door for myself. It is ironic since I open it for other, or at least try to. There is a quiet place I must touch to be able to go on with my work, a place of prayer, a deep place that is not easy to find. It far easier to get lost in all the distractions, the noises and demands than it is to listen to your soul. Especially if what you hear when you listen is your own pain or grief. As we all do at times when we have suffered losses. The last thing we want to do then is to be still, to listen. And yet it is perhaps the most healing thing we can do for ourselves: to listen carefully, lovingly, as if to a small child to what our spirits need, to the small still voice within. As in this poem called:

Listening

My father could hear a little animal step,
or a moth in the dark against the screen,
and every far sound called the listening out
into places where most of us had never been.

More spoke to him from the soft wild night
than came to our porch for us on the wind;
we would watch him look up and his face go keen
till the walls of the world flared, widened.

My father heard so much that we still stand
inviting the quiet by turning the face,
waiting for a time when something in the night
will touch us too from that other place.

William Stafford.

This summer I saw the Grand Canyon again in its immense glory and beauty. But as good as that experience was I wanted more. I wanted to sit at that edge and just look at the light and the shadows following the clouds over those canyons, watch the colors change with the light and forget myself entirely. I wanted to rest in the beauty of that place, quietly sit and not have to go anywhere...for days on end. Of course I could not do this, my work was waiting. But it reminded me that I do belong to this earth. Scientists tell me that meteor showers are best seen out of the corner of your eye. The retina's light detectors are concentrated there. It is the same way with our lives. Sometimes life's flashes of brilliance and radiance occur, not directly in the line of sight, but hidden, on the borders of conscious awareness. Shooting stars descend every night, not in downpours, but in a continuous gentle rain. These celestial visitors remind us that eternity can spill and shimmers like quicksilver. Pay attention to what is fleeting, they seem to say. Soften your focus. Adjust your

eyes to darkness. Rest your body on the earth. What you are looking for is glimpsed not seen.

Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote: *The best part of every mind is not what a person knows, but that which hovers in gleams, suggestions, tantalizing before him.*

There is a quiet strength within each of us. I liken it to a bright star hidden deep in the dark velvet night of your soul. In our busy lives we may lose sight of it. In our fear and pain we may feel lost and no longer know it is there. Some of us call it God, some call it the Spirit and some of us give it no name at all. What I do know is that to find it we must listen. Listen, carefully, patiently, lovingly as if to a precious child. *When was the last time you did that?* As I close I invite you to reflect on these words by Thomas Merton:

When I am liberated by silence, when I am no longer involved in the measurement of life, but in the living of it, I can discover a form of prayer in which there is effectively no distraction. My whole life becomes a prayer. My whole silence is full of prayer. The world of silence in which I am immersed contributes to my prayer...

Let me seek then the gift of silence...where everything I touch is turned into prayer: where the sky is my prayer, the birds are my prayer; the wind in the trees is my prayer, for God is in all.

