

Sermon By Rev. Peaches Gillette

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First Unitarian Society of Ithaca

The Transformation of the Heart

We have entered an era where despair and loneliness have become the order of the day, but mostly when we think of action steps and things that will help transform our society, we have a tendency to focus on politics, economics, and institutions as the target for our efforts., and have a tendency to underestimate the intimate things we can do for others that can help move them from despair and aloneness to remembering they are still here, still seen, still cared for, that their lives paths are not stagnant, but can be transformed. I found this sad headline of an article in *USA Today*.

“Americans are lonely and it’s killing them. How the US can combat this new epidemic.”

It goes on to say:

“America has a new epidemic. It can’t be treated using traditional therapies even though it has debilitating and even deadly consequences. The problem seeping in at the corners of our communities is loneliness and U.S.Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy is hoping to generate awareness and offer remedies before it claims more lives.”

This. life can be overwhelming as we watch, often helplessly, all the suffering around us. We meet, and plan, and act, and feel we cannot even begin to penetrate the massive membrane of heartache that comes with all the injustices we face and experience, all the social and environmental doom that hangs over us like a pall over a coffin.

We know we need change, we know we need a complete transformation of heart and soul and spirit, of systems, of institutions, and of the economy so that those who have not and those who have can meet somewhere in the middle, at a metaphoric table and

share all that is before them. All of us strive to do what we can, and at times we simply feel what we can offer or do for others is too little, that we are too small, too ordinary to make a difference. We are not.

And we must not disregard any measure of reaching out and helping another - never.

I met Edith, a 93-year-old woman at a conference last spring; it was the opening of the Dalai Lama Library up at the monastery. I was on a panel of people sharing part of their life's journey, their spiritual journey, and, you know, there is no doubt, mine began with my mother. There was nothing earth-shattering about what I said - a simple attesting to the grace and compassion, and forgiveness I watched my mother move through life with in spite of her own struggles with poverty and health, a simple story that conveyed my sense of safety and awe. After all of us on the panel finished speaking, I was walking up the aisle to leave and I almost bumped into the sidearm of Edith's chair who was in a wheelchair, being pushed by, who I found out, her son, and I apologized profusely for being a bit mindless and started to pass her by. She reached out and touched my arm and said she wanted to meet me. I immediately responded, "Well. I am happy to meet you, and I took her hand, warm, soft, relaxed - the feeling of a hand that no longer toiled. All muscle tone gone - the hand of someone who was done with a certain part of physical life.

She began to weep and told me my story reminded her of her mother, how protected she felt as a child as her mother managed to keep her safe, level-headed and almost graceful, clever, as they escaped from Austria when she was a young girl - there were already murmurings.

She somehow felt she had to know me - she thought we had a spiritual connection. I say all this to say that I have been visiting Edith once a week at her nursing home since then. She said our visits have changed her - has made her happy - makes her

feel understood - an old woman who is not listened to in the same way anymore.
For me, there is an absolute beauty and perfectness in what I consider our friendship - Edith and I have been transformed - we can never undo or change the fact that we met and came to love one another across so many differences, across age, across race, across circumstance. We did something small, like dared to talk, and it transformed us,.
When someone hungers, they will eat what we can lovingly feed them.

We live in a world that suffers great hunger - hunger for food, hunger for love, hunger for homes, job security, living wages, hunger for basic resources, hunger for shelter, hunger for medical care, hunger for acceptance, hunger for human contact, hunger for community, and at the end of it all, hunger for hope and love. Hope and love.
If you did not realize it, hope and love are transformative.

Here is a wonderful quote about what transformation is - unknown author:

“Human transformation is an internal shift that brings us in alignment with our highest potential. It is at the heart of every major aspect of our lives. It affects how we see and relate to the world, and how we understand our place in it.”

It is the change of the nature and heart of who we are. The nature of Edith’s change was based on her tentativeness about Black people – that is deep. The nature of my change?
There is no perceived distance between me and another that, if I see it, I will not cross.

Hope and love fill us with the will to go on even in the face of the thought that we cannot. Hope and love come through many acts and those like us, ordinary people, can engage in these acts, and can provide hope and love any time we put our minds to it.
This morning, I want to share with you a few stories of ordinary people providing the transformative power of hope and love because they saw and believed, and acted. They

knew that even if they could not change and transform the angry world, they could change and transform the smaller world in someone's life and make a difference. I love these stories. They are simple stories:

Caroline Lindner, Nashville Street Barbers: This hair stylist devotes one day of her week to serving the homeless through the nonprofit she founded, Nashville Street Barbers. On Mondays, she and other barbers head out to provide free haircuts to people in the homeless community.

Gina Camelli, Paw Pantry: After noticing a rise in poverty in her district, this elementary school teacher in Warren, Ohio, wanted to help. She founded Paw Pantry, a nonprofit that provides clothing, food, school supplies and hygiene items for any student in the school district who is in need.

Jeffrey Thomas, Scarves for Students: While teaching special education at Lew Wallace School in Indiana, Thomas noted the large number of students who came to school with nothing warmer than a sweatshirt. Thomas got busy, clipping coupons and shopping sales, so he could make a large batch of brand new fleece scarves for all 650 students.

Pastor Chris Williams, God's Garage: One day, Pastor Chris Williams discovered a mother and child from his congregation walking along a highway, inspiring him to start God's Garage to help single mothers, widows and wives of deployed military members with car repairs. Though Williams has no training in car mechanics, he found some volunteers who do, resulting in more than 300 vehicles fixed at no cost and 100 restored vehicles given away.

Rodney Smith Jr., Raising Men Lawn Care Service: When the computer science student saw an older man struggling to push his lawn mower, he didn't hesitate to help. From there he was inspired to create Raising Men Lawn Care Service, which helps people who lack the time, physical ability, resources or money to keep their yards maintained.

All over the world, there are people just like you and me saving the day for others. The transformative power of love, gives other hope to go on even when they feel they cannot. Large changes, all transformation, begins with a series smaller steps. NEVER minimize what we can do to transform the hearts of others, to give them hope, to allow them to get through another day feeling that someone cares.

I came across this preamble from the United Nations 2030 agenda for sustainable development.

“This Agenda is a plan of action for people, planet, and prosperity. It also seeks to strengthen universal peace in larger freedom. We recognize that eradicating poverty in all its forms and dimensions, including extreme poverty, is the greatest global challenge and an indispensable requirement for sustainable development. All countries and all stakeholders, acting in collaborative partnership, will implement this plan. We are resolved to free the human race from the tyranny of poverty and want and to heal and secure our planet. We are determined to take the bold and transformative steps which are urgently needed to shift the world onto a sustainable and resilient path. As we embark on this collective journey, we pledge that no one will be left behind.”

All change, all transformation, begins with each of us - it begins in the hearts of individuals and swells into a monumental call for action.

I will end with this quote by Margaret Mead, who was an American cultural anthropologist

“Never ever doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.”