

FINDING GOODNESS

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**Unitarian Church of All Souls
Lay Sunday Sermon, January 28, 1996**

I've been wondering about today for a long time. This is my moment to say what I think, how I feel, what I believe, who I am. And, this morning, I have decided to come out of the closet! I am a man who ... lacks confidence. I struggle with words. I don't want to be misunderstood, or underestimated, or unable. I often feel that someone else can say it better. I would rather listen than speak. I want to hear what is right, and to be told that I am a good and able person. But by All Souls' tradition, I am chosen to speak. How am I qualified? I'm no theologian, and certainly not a scholar. Well, I did go to school. In fact, I have degrees proving I spent years listening. Course work taught me labels to categorize conditions. But life work has taught me not to assume, but to question.

Have you ever thought about writing your autobiography? What title would you pick to summarize yourself, how would you like to be labeled? I remember as a teenager, I fantasized about writing my autobiography. Although I never wrote a sentence, I had my book title ready: "Infinitely Able to Cope." Of course, most of us won't write that book, but people will give us titles. We are labeled and summarized by how we are perceived. In high school, I was labeled a high achiever, an honors student, a good citizen. My only brother, Jim, was labeled handicapped, schizophrenic, legally blind. I clung to my fantasy book title while my brother and my family learned to live with his disability. The day after I graduated from college, we took Jim to the psychiatric hospital where he has lived for the past twenty-seven years. In retrospect, how naïve my book title was. Nothing about life is infinite.

I've come to question, who can be truly able? And, I wonder about that word, cope. But beyond all of that, I've learned here that my story is not so unusual. I've spent my whole career working in organizations that serve people with disabilities like psychiatric disorders, hearing loss, brain injury, and vision impairment. I've seen some odd reactions by nondisabled people when they visit my workplaces. And, I believe for reasons that may surprise you. For one, it's our own embarrassment. As social beings, we establish rapport with others by communication. When we meet someone who can't hear our greetings, or who makes an unfamiliar sound, we are thrown off, we're not at ease. We don't know that to do or how to act. We are embarrassed that we can't communicate. The deaf culture is characterized by its isolations from the hearing world.

People with behavior disorders cause us to feel anxious. Their strange actions make us question why they don't have better self control. We may feel patronizing pity and be sorry they are not like us. People with vision impairment often complain about

condescending attitudes that discourage them. In remote areas of China, blind people are shunned for fear that it's contagious. And finally, we're simply uncomfortable with difference.

But we're learning. Think about how labels have changed over the years. We don't use the word "crippled" anymore. It sounds demeaning. Other words have fallen from usage: the infirm, deaf mute, moron, asylum. It's best to say people first, like people who are blind, rather than the blind. A label can seem total, as if every aspect of the person's being is defined by the disability, and as if all who have that condition are the same.

I've often thought about the historical name of this church. It still fits. It was never All Saints, never about perfect people. It was established for, and remains about, everyone, All Souls. I once lived in Washington, D.C. and belonged to a wonderful Baptist Church. One Sunday, the minister mentioned a former member a man I'd never met, and said that he had died in New York. The minister went on to say, "He had that new disease. It's God's punishment. He must have been a sinner." A few months later, I accepted a job in New York. My church gave me a grand farewell tribute. They said they loved me. But I remember fearing, what will be said about me, if I too, become sick.

In the mid 80s, the name of the new disease evolved, from Gay Related Immune Deficiency to AIDS. In 1987, I was riding the subway, and saw an astonishing poster, "Treat people with AIDS with kindness. It won't kill you." It's hard now to remember how at that time, there was no real public mention of the word "AIDS." In small print, it also said the Unitarian Church of All Souls. I visited your church, joined soon after, and have deeply appreciated my nine years here.

When trying to write thoughts for this morning, I thought of another fantasy book title. This one packs more punch. It would grab readers' attention. How about "The Inevitability of Disability?" Well, maybe not. It's probably too morose. But each of us will come to know the loss of abilities first hand. For ourselves, our loved ones, through accidents, illnesses, the aging process, we will all lose. But we will also gain. Because here, I have learned that life's lessons about loss, can also teach us about love and understanding. I have two stories about magnificent people in this church. I volunteer with your AIDS Task Force. I remember being in charge of a planning meeting one evening. And those of you who know me can picture that I was sitting with my notepad, trying to follow an agenda. I felt frustrated. A newcomer, an intimidating executive type, was asking assertive questions, and I didn't know how to respond. I was tired and eager for the meeting to adjourn so I could go home. I remember how he stayed beside me, even while I walked out of the door toward the subway. His enthusiasm was intense. He got on the train with me, and in the middle of a crowd of strangers he confided in me that he'd just learned that he was HIV positive. He'd told no one. Not his wife, not his children ... but he was telling me. I felt overwhelmed. I couldn't imagine what to say. But as it turned out, my instinct to listen was all that was needed then. We became close friends. And our experiences over the years in this church had great meaning for me, for him, and for his family. The service in this sanctuary commemorating his life was filled with love and thankfulness.

My next story is about our support group called the Women's Network. It's for women who have AIDS or are HIV positive. Imagine the extraordinary bond in that group, and the wonder of the gift you've given by inviting them to meet in this church, a holy place for good people. Sadly, the need for the group has not diminished, but the spiritual healing continues as once isolated, fearful women connect one to another. One evening, I happened to be standing in the church receptionist's office. A visitor arrived and asked about some meeting. The receptionist looked at the room schedule, and found nothing. The visitor explained that she was a sign language interpreter, and maybe there was a mistake. And so, the interpreter left. A short time later, I saw a beautiful woman standing near the grandfather clock. She wasn't looking toward me, and when I spoke a greeting, she didn't respond. When she did look at me, we were both surprised as we realized that we knew each other from years before. I had met her and her husband in Washington, at Gallaudet University. They were both successful professionals, both deaf. I was happy to see her here in New York, and at All Souls. I asked her in sign language if she had come to attend the chapel service. She hesitantly responded, saying that she'd been told about a special group meeting, and she was visiting for the first time. I then realized that the interpreter who had left had been arranged for my friend. We talked in sign language, and in a few minutes, we decided to knock on the Ware Room door. That evening, I became an honorary woman. I sat in a circle in the Ware Room, and listened to each story of sadness and of victory, and translated the words with my hands for my friend. Then, she told her story, and through my voice she described how her beloved husband had died of AIDS, and said that she could never tell her family that she was also HIV positive. She talked about how deaf people often misunderstand, like thinking that positive is good, that you've passed an awful test. She became a regular member of the group, and over a few months, developed the confidence to tell her family. Rather than rejecting her as she feared, they encircled her with love, and took her home to their farm, when her health declined.

I believe that in every person, and in every situation, there is goodness to share. And it's our challenge to find it, because it's not always apparent. And I know that we have to also learn to find goodness in ourselves. I told a friend that I was trying to write today's message and that I thought I could compare finding goodness with finding fault, which seems to be more common. She laughed, and said that finding fault is human nature. But, I think that fault finding comes from fear. Fear that we can't control, that we can't cope, that we can't change. But finding goodness frees us to listen, frees us to learn, frees us to share understanding. We are strengthened when we know we are not alone in our journey.

You may have heard of the cabaret singer, Nancy LaMott. My partner Tom and I are great fans of her music. Last summer, we met Nancy in Midland, Michigan where she performed for two thousand hometown encouragers. There was a display of newspaper clippings describing her rise to fame, and how she had coped with a debilitating disability since her teenage years. In December, Nancy died at the age of 43 from cancer. One of her songs is called "We Can Be Kind." It was written by David Friedman, her manager's lover.

She sings ...

So many things we can't control

*So many hurts that happen every day
So many heartaches that pierce the soul
So much pain that won't ever go away*

*How can we make it better?
How can we make it through?
What can we do, when there's nothing we can do?*

*We can be kind.
We can take care of each other.
We can remember that deep down inside, we all need the same thing.*

*And maybe we'll find,
If we are there for each other,
That together we'll weather whatever tomorrow may bring.*

*And maybe we'll find
True peace of mind
If we always remember
We can be kind.*

I am so grateful to be a part of this congregation. A few of you have asked what I'll do when this assignment is finished. I want to join you in expanding our welcoming love, and in increasing our inclusion efforts.

I hope that what I've tried to say has made some sense. We all strive to move from dependence to independence, but there is another step in that progression, and that's to understand our interdependence. Each of us has lessons to learn and lessons to teach. And when you believe in people, you fortify them. By your encouragement, they find courage. The key is finding goodness, that inherent worth and dignity in ourselves, and in others.

I thank you for your lessons and for your love.