

So, here we are, a religious community without a minister. It's a challenging place, an uncomfortable place. We don't know where we are going, but we know we don't want to stay here for too long. For those of us who were unhappy with things Rev. Leslie said or did, or failed to do, there may be a sense of relief. For those of us who were nurtured by her ministry, there may be a deep sense of loss. Many of us don't know all the details surrounding her departure, leaving us with a sense of unease. Many are angry and hurt, some feel betrayed, some confused. Most of us have some level of anxiety regarding what comes next. Each of us is navigating the path ahead by a different constellation of feelings, and it's hard to see how we will all get to the same place when we finally figure out where "there" is. As we sang in our gathering music, if I knew the way, I would take you home, but I am not our

minister. The Board is not the minister. The staff are not the minister. For now, it's just us.

We are a community, bound by covenant. Each of us is operating from a place of love and protectiveness of this place we hold so dear. And, many of us are angry at each other, have been hurt by one another. Some of us have lost trust in others, leading us to question whether we are in covenant at all. All the hallmarks of our adversarial society have oozed through our walls, and we find ourselves taking sides and lobbying others to our cause. Something feels cracked, perhaps fractured all the way through. How do we begin to heal? We are starting the process to get our next minister, who will hopefully have skill in mending our brokenness, but really, we need to start tending our wounds right away.

In his book *A New Earth*, Eckhart Tolle explains that each of us has a pain body. It is made up of all the pain and suffering that

we carry with us. When we tell our pain stories over and over, we feed the pain body. In fact, the pain body can grow so strong that we confuse it for who we are. We operate from our pain and we identify ourselves as “the person who was hurt in this way.” If the church is a body, then we have a collective pain body as well, a story that we tell, over and over, of how our community has been wronged. Whether personal or communal, a pain body anchors us in the past and makes moving forward incredibly difficult. In order to heal, we have to stop feeding it. We have to stop telling the stories of our suffering over and over. And we definitely have to stop telling the stories of each other’s suffering, for by doing so, we deny them healing as well.

That is not to say that we should forget our experiences or pretend that things were different than they were. Our memories are important. It is from our memories that we learn

lessons and develop a deeper understanding of ourselves, of our gifts and our needs. But we don't need to keep feeling the pain. There is no value in continuing to suffer.

So how do we let it go? Here Eckhart Tolle, and Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh, and Nonviolent Communication founder Marshall Rosenberg are all in agreement. It starts with taking one last look at each event as objectively as possible.

We begin by examining what actually happened, what we observed and what we felt. It may be helpful to write it down, so that we can see that it had a beginning and an end, and perhaps we can begin to believe that the pain could also have an end. Then we take a step back, and we apply the healing salve of empathy. In practicing Nonviolent Communication, we are reminded that all people take their actions in order to try to get their needs met. Can we try to understand the reason behind another person's actions? Can we remember how

grateful we have been when someone else was able to empathize with us when we tried to get our needs met using less-than-compassionate strategies? Cultivating love, in the forms of empathy and compassion, leads us to a place where healing and forgiveness are possible. By honoring our feelings as teachers of love, we leave anger and blame, shame and guilt, behind us and continue on the path to healing.

Each of us is responsible for doing this reflection. Each of us has to do our own inner work in order for the community to be restored to wholeness. We need to examine not just what hurt us, but our own part in any conflict as well. If we can acknowledge where we may have been in the wrong, and compassionately forgive ourselves, we will be in a place to make amends and choose more wisely in the future. All of this can feel very isolating. It's wise to enlist the help of a trusted listener, someone who will hold your pain, hear your story

without judgement, guide you in looking at it more objectively, and honor your commitment to leaving it in the past.

As we do this self-examination, we will begin to see that our pain comes from our needs not being met. This is where the lessons of the experience are learned. Once we know what our needs are, we can then envision how they could be met in a healthy way. What would it look like to feel nurtured and fulfilled? How would you act or speak differently to care for yourself and others? Can you imagine what behavior in others would feel correct and good in future similar situations? If our pain is the pain of loss, the pain of inevitable change, can we see what might once again meet our needs that had been met in a different way or by a different person in the past?

It is at this point that we will be ready to heal the community as a whole, to repair our covenant. From a place of honest reflection, from a place of true acceptance of our shared,

flawed humanity, we will know what to ask of each other, and will be open to giving each other what we ask for. These are the transforming gifts of love. We will also have a much better understanding of what needs we want our minister to help us meet and we will be better able to communicate that clearly. A covenant is a sacred agreement of how we intend to treat one another. When we can envision what it looks like to serve one another in love, the words of a new covenant will flow. We will have returned to who we are.

When we operate from a place of hope, rather than pain, we will be ready to tell, over and over again, the stories of everything that has been going well. We will be able to hold up the examples of how we have helped each other to get our needs met in healthy ways. Memories will come to mind of the ways that our past ministers, all of them, have demonstrated

the compassion and caring that we crave. We will be ready to receive those stories as well.

I want to share one of these stories, a story of things going well. It's the story of our choir. At this time last year, our choir was largely made up of the same members we have today. We each brought a considerable amount of musical skill. We all had a strong commitment to serving the congregation by offering our music in worship. But we didn't know how to get from where we were then to where we wanted to be. And so, Tom Steffens was hired to be our choir director. We were very blessed to have a director who could meet us exactly where we were. Tom arranged music specifically for our voices and our skill level, challenging us to learn new skills with each new piece. He never hesitated to let us know when we needed improvement, and he always gave us guidance in how to tackle the next hurdle. For our part, we were willing to be led. At our

last practice with Tom, he pointed out what he saw as the particular things that allowed us to be successful. The first was that he had a very specific skill set. His expertise is in taking a choir that is in one place and helping it get to the next level. He was able to diagnose what was not working, and give direction in how to fix it. The other factors that Tom identified were characteristics of the choir members themselves. He told us that we progressed in large part because we never told him that a piece of music was too hard. We never said, “We can’t do this. Give us something else.” There were pieces we didn’t like. There were some arrangements that weren’t our favorites, but we trusted the process and trusted our leader. The final element that contributed to our success was that we all showed up, every week. As Tom said, “If I had to start a piece with only half of you there, then the next week we would

have had to start over with the people who showed up that week. The progress would have been much, much slower. It's easy to check out when things feel really uncomfortable. It's tough to dig in and do the hard work. But we can be here for each other while we do it. We are going. Heaven knows where we are going, but we know we will. We are building a new way. Together.

In his book *Anger*, Thich Nhat Hanh shares an analogy that makes a fitting ending:

“When it is raining, we think that there is no sunshine. But if we fly high in an airplane and go through the clouds, we re-discover the sunshine again. We see that the sunshine is always there. In a time of anger or despair, our love is there also. Our capacity to communicate, to forgive, to be

compassionate is still there. You have to believe this. We are more than our anger, we are more than our suffering. We must recognize that we do have within us the capacity to love, to understand, to be compassionate. If you know this, then when it rains, you won't be desperate. You know that the rain is there, but the sunshine is still there somewhere. Soon the rain will stop, and the sun will shine again. Have hope. If you can remind yourself that the positive elements are still present within you and [other people], you will know that it is possible to break through, so that the best things in [all] of you can come up and manifest again.”

May it be so, and Blessed Be.