"Old Woman Darning" ~ Nicolae Grigorescu

"Mending"

First Parish in Wayland
October 4, 2026

Rev. Lauren Smith

Sermon: "Mending"
Given at the First Parish in Wayland
On October 4, 2026
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How shall we mend you, sweet Soul?
What shall we use, and how is it
in the first place you've come to be torn?
Come sit. Come tell me.
We will find a way to mend you.[1]

Many years ago, my husband Chris brought me a gift I have never forgotten. We were grieving a difficult loss at the time, and I guess he wanted to do something nice for me. He arrived home one evening carrying a basket with some small items inside—a pair of fuzzy socks, a set of placemats, other bits and bobs. He held out the basket and said, "I brought you soft things because this is hard."

The socks and placemats are long gone, but I have never forgotten the kindness of those words, or how seen and held I felt in that moment.

Last month, Chris's parents moved out of the home in Taunton they have shared for 35 years. They re-located to an independent living apartment not far from us. Though the move is necessary, and though we're all glad to be living closer to each other, the process has been a heartbreak for my in-laws. They loved their home and the memories they made in it.

A couple of weeks ago, I stopped by their new place with a housewarming gift, fresh new fluffy towels. I shared with them the words their son once shared with me: "I brought you soft things because this is hard." My mother-in-law took a towel in her hand and rested her face in it, closing her eyes. The gift was from me and, indirectly, from

[1] "Mending" from *Instructions in Joy: Meditations* by Nancy Shaffer, 2002.

the son she raised. The son who taught me the healing power of gentle words.

How shall we mend you, sweet Soul?
…We will find a way to mend you.

A few days ago, a group of volunteers set up special lighting on the green in front of the church. At night, our meetinghouse is bathed in purple light to bear witness to the issue of domestic violence in our community. Houses of worship and other buildings in Wayland, Lincoln, Sudbury, Weston and Framingham will be lit up all month, thanks to the wonderful leadership of the Domestic Violence Roundtable, thanks to some of you. The Roundtable is a local non-profit founded in 1999 dedicated to education and awareness-raising. They also partner with direct service providers to strengthen the network of care available for people who need pathways to safety and independence.

Four women from Sudbury founded the organization. While attending a League of Women Voters workshop, they learned that domestic violence was prevalent in both suburban and urban areas, in poorer and more affluent communities. They also noted a lack of resources in our area and decided to act.

How shall we mend you, sweet Soul?
…I would offer you
this chair by the window, this sunlight
on the floor and the cat asleep in it.
I would offer you my silence,
my presence, all this love I have.

There is power in simply showing up when the hardest things happen. There is power in presence. I learned this lesson during my internship at the Winchester Unitarian Society way back in 2005. That was the year Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans.

After the storm receded, the city and the region were devastated. My internship supervisor, the Rev. Mary Harrington, called her colleague at a little congregation on the north shore of Lake Pontchartrain. She asked, "How are you?" and then listened for a very long time as he described what he, his congregation and their neighbors had experienced. Mary was one of the most gifted listeners I have ever met. She could make a little sanctuary out of her listening, into which a person could pour their whole tattered tale until it was done.

When Rev. David stopped talking, Mary asked: "How can we help? Would you like us to come down or would you like us to send money?"

Without hesitation, David replied: "Come down. We need to see you. We need you to see this. We need you to see what has happened."

And so a group of us went—a motley band of elders, youth and everyone in between, to be with the Unitarian Universalists of the North Shore.

We were sent out in small groups to assist where we could, ripping out mildewed cabinetry, hauling debris or making small repairs. I remember going with a group to the home of a woman named Lucy. An enormous tree had fallen in her yard, just missing the house. We took turns using a chainsaw to break the tree apart and drag pieces out to the road. When lunchtime came, Lucy brought out lemonade, and we sat together as she told us stories about the tree—memories of her children playing in it and gatherings under the canopy. When the day ended, we said goodbye to Lucy and drove back to the church where we were staying. Great piles of trees and branches lined the road, waiting for FEMA to come collect them. So much damage. So many stories.

We weren't the most efficient recovery team, but I believe we were a small, important part of the healing after the hurricane, sipping

lemonade and listening to stories, witnesses to the human disaster that accompanied the natural disaster.

In the story Kate shared earlier, the Ostrich advises the protagonist (Taylor): "Let's hide and pretend nothing happened."[2] It is natural to want to avert one's eyes from pain—our own pain or the pain of others—rather than face it. And there is a time and a place for everything, including, sometimes, looking away from something hard until we are ready to face it. But, as writer James Baldwin says, "Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced."

I am a Black woman and I get my hair done in Black salons. Salons and barber shops are important hubs of Black community. The church, too, has a central place in Black community though there is a wide range of religious beliefs and non-belief among us. I think the church's importance stems from a time when Black people were excluded from many aspects of citizenship. The church has been a center for our faith and our civic life, for community organizing and community care. That means, in part, that I am a minister of the Black Church simply by virtue of being a minister and a Black woman connected with Black communities, even though I serve a predominantly White congregation.

All of that might explain how I got drawn into a tender conversation one day while I was getting my hair done. A woman was paying for the services she had received, talking with someone behind the counter. The woman was new to the area, having just moved in with her fiancé and his three children. She felt uncomfortable in her new house, uncomfortable with her lack of access to family finances, unsettled by the way her soon-to-be-husband assumed she would slide into caring for the kids. She said, "I keep praying about it, but I still don't have answers. I feel like maybe I should be more flexible and more loving."

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[2] *The Rabbit Listened*, by Cori Doerrfeld, 2018.

The person behind the counter pointed at me in my black cape covered in hair trimmings and said, “Why don’t you ask her? She’s a pastor.” They both turned to me. I was maybe two years into ministry at this point, very green and daunted by the questions at hand. Today, I might have shared a phone number for her to call if her situation worsened and she needed help, or a small card like the ones in our church’s bathrooms. But I did listen. And as the woman shared more about her situation, I could hear many yellow and even red flags. I have no idea what the true story of her relationship was, but she clearly felt that something was off. Dynamics were unfolding that didn’t seem right to her, but she doubted the validity of her own experience.

That’s one of the hallmarks of controlling relationships: they disrupt a person’s faith in their own judgment. I said to her then and I say to you now: “Feel what you feel. See what you see. Honor what you notice.” I said to the woman in the shop, “Come to prayer from that place of honesty, and you the answers that come back to you will be more useful.”

How shall we mend you, sweet Soul?
What shall we use, and how is it
in the first place you’ve come to be torn?
…We will find a way to mend you.

In community, prevention is a critical aspect of healing. We discover together how to create a culture in which people, their bodies and their dignity are held sacred. We knit a fabric of care where the skills of loving and respectful relationship can develop.

I think of the Our Whole Lives classes we offer to youth in our congregation and the wider community. Our Whole Lives, which we call OWL for short, is a comprehensive series of sexuality education curricula tailored to developmental stages from kindergarten through elder adulthood. The crown jewel of the program is the offering for 7th through 9th graders.

My former colleague Melanie Davis, who serves as the Unitarian Universalist Associations OWL Program Manager. She describes OWL succinctly: "OWL provides engaging, medically accurate sexuality education that helps people of all ages respect and accept themselves and others, take pleasure in their bodies, make informed and responsible decisions, and advocate for their own and others' safety and rights."[3]

At the end of every class, each participant puts a question in an anonymous question box. If a person doesn't have a question, they're still required to add a blank piece of paper so that everyone can put in something without calling attention to themselves. The facilitators will answer any and every question at the end of the next session—although no personal questions are permitted, about the facilitators or anyone else. That's a protective boundary for the group.

Usually youth begin by testing facilitators, asking explicit questions to see if they'll really get answers. They facilitators *do* answer, matter-of-factly and without fuss. But here's the surprising thing: Once the testing has abated, most of the questions are about relationship. *How do I tell someone I don't want to be friends with them any more without hurting their feelings? How do I know if someone likes me? How can I get someone to stop teasing me?* We give the youth a place to explore questions like these, get some answers, and explore new skills.

People aren't born knowing how to stand up for their own and others' safety and rights. We have to learn.

This is a house of learning.

One of the OWL sessions includes a role play around turning someone down for a date. Volunteers get up two by two. One asks and one

[3] "Our Whole Lives 25th Anniversary" Video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-k8mfc1zeHc

declines, and then we get to talk about what it means to communicate boundaries clearly in a way that aligns with our values.

How shall we mend you, sweet Soul?
…We will mend you with pieces of your own
sweet self, sweet Sou

What you see, what you feel, what you know.
We will accompany you as you develop the skill to live your values in the world, to advocate for your own safety and rights, for the safety and rights of others.

How shall we mend you, sweet Soul?
With these, I think, gently
we can begin:

With gentle words and music.
With soft things to hold you when life is hard.
With the sanctuary of listening that holds our tattered tales
With our silence, our presence, all this love,
And our sorrow you've become torn.

The Domestic Violence Roundtable has a program called Showers for Safety that provides items for people establishing new households after leaving an abusive or problematic situation. Donors are invited to contribute gift cards, which recipients can use to buy new bedding, dishes a soft new bathmat into which they can sink their toes and know they are home.

I love to imagine that the care of this community, through our generosity this morning, will support education and awareness-raising, and a little softness that carries someone through a hard time to healing.

May it be so. *Amen.*