

We All Need Somebody to Lean On **Rev. Joan Montagnes**

I entered college, lo these many years ago, brazenly confident in my vocation to become a world-class ecologist. I felt passionately about making a difference. I wanted to be the environmental savior of our age. After all, high school hadn't been that bad: I wasn't brilliant, but I got along. I knew my sciences. Got pretty good grades. Struggled a little in math, but passed near the top of the heap in biology, and slightly ahead of the pack in physics and chemistry. My potential, I felt, was high.

And then, in my freshman year of college, I was confronted with a level of chemistry that popped the balloon of all my dreams like a mutant ninja porcupine at a kid's birthday party.

Back in high school we had to be able to read the periodic table. We had to know what nuclei, protons, neutrons and electrons were. And we graduated with a understanding that atoms were basically bouncing around the universe like billiard balls who occasionally made friends and formed molecules.

In high school chemistry class the universe made sense. And all was well. No wonder I thought that, if I picked up a little higher education, I could go out and save the world.

But something awful happened in college freshman chemistry. One day the professor walked up to the blackboard and casually began to explain that atoms were not, in fact, billiard balls bouncing around in space.

He informed us of this in a calculated and soothing manner, as a horse whisperer might calm a twitchy filly. The professor didn't want to spook us, and send his delicate and naïve freshmen into a panic. He calmly and quietly told us that all the atoms of the universe are hardly anywhere at all. That the matter which makes up the universe mostly isn't. That we can guess at the shape of atoms and how they might behave; but because the electrons are all whirring around wherever they please, whenever they please, the words best to describe these basic building blocks of life, the universe and everything are "probability" and "uncertainty."

My mind exploded. Nothing made sense any more. My hope of saving the world – my hope of understanding the world – dribbled out the side my dumbfounded mouth. I won't say that I quit science then and there and went into religion. But it was pretty darned close.

Sometimes spiritual awakenings burst in our lives when what we thought we understood – and what can never be understood – collide like supernovas. My chemistry professor, taught me that electrons travel around nuclei so loosely that when I touch this pulpit – when I connect with this pulpit – part of me enters the wood and part of the wood enters me.

My mild mannered, slightly nerdy chemistry professor was simply trying to give us a basic understanding of atomic physics. But what he taught me is that we are connected. We are connected in mystery and miracle, in ways we may never understand.

We are connected very physically, very rationally, very scientifically to each other; to our wider and wider communities, and ultimately to the universe. My professor, while teaching me chemistry, blew my mind with a spiritual awakening. And I knew then and there that the foundation of my theology was the inescapable network of mutuality in which we live and move and breathe. I knew then and there, from the center of my being, that our connections, our relationships, were so powerful that they could only be called Holy and Divine.

Chemistry taught me that the interdependent web of all existence could also be called radical Love – a Love that will not, cannot let you go. We are not billiard balls independently careening through space. No one is an island. We are connected in mystery and miracle – in ways we may never understand – to each other, to our wider and wider communities. And ultimately, to the universe

Rebecca Parker tells us that we are born into relationship with everyone and everything. We are born into a covenant. We do not create covenant, we inherit it. We inherit a set of promises that describe how we will be with one another – a set of promises which are not superficial – because they are not only made with another person group of people. The promises we inherit are made with the creative, sustaining, healing, commanding, transforming powers of connection.

That is accountability at the highest order. So when one of us breaks covenant – when one of us is hurtful, hateful, violent, oppressive, disrespectful, damaging to any of our relationships – when one of us breaks covenant, we go out of our ways, to bring our loved one back. We embody that divine, radical Love that binds each to all. We invite our loved one to come back and live in love with us again.

Now don't understand me too quickly. I don't mean we, in this beloved community should all agree all the time. A community without the dynamic tension of conflict is neither creative nor healthy. Nor am I saying that we should tolerate intolerable behavior.

What I am saying is that we, as people of faith, are called to be mindful of all our connections. We are called to seek right relationship without ceasing.

Here is a story for you. Back in 1932 Tom Dorsey was a young jazz musician and a newlywed. He and his wife were living in a little apartment on Chicago's Southside. And one August afternoon he went to go to St. Louis, where he was to be the featured soloist at a large revival meeting. He didn't want to go. His wife was in the last month of pregnancy with their first child. But the show must go on, so off he went.

It was hot in St Louis. The crowd called on him to sing for hours. And when he finally sat down, exhausted, thirsty, fulfilled from a rewarding experience of music and praise, a messenger boy ran up with a Western Union telegram.

Dorsey ripped open the envelope. And there, pasted on the yellow sheet paper were the words: YOUR WIFE JUST DIED. . . .

Dorsey rushed back to Chicago and learned that his wife had given birth to a baby boy. But, that night, the baby died too. So he buried his wife and his son together, in the same casket. And the leaden burden of grief fell upon his spirit, and he fell apart.

For days he closeted himself away from the world. He felt that God had done him an injustice. He didn't want to serve God anymore or write gospel songs in praise of God. But even though he was lost in grief – unable to face the day – his community reached out to him. He was not alone. His community reached out to him.

On the following Saturday evening, one of Dorsey's professors took him up to a neighborhood music school, and left him alone by a piano. It was quiet; the late evening sun crept through the curtained windows. Dorsey sat down at the keys, and his hands began to play, and he began to sing:

*Precious Lord, take my hand
Lead on, let me stand
I am tired, I am weak, I am worn
Through the storm, through the night,
Lead me on to the light;
Take my hand, precious Lord
Lead me home.*

When I sing "Precious Lord take my hand," I am not asking some big guy sitting on a throne in the clouds to actually hold my hand and guide me through my troubles. I am not asking to be led home to Heaven because this world is too hard for me. When I sing "Precious Lord take my hand," I mean "This" connection. I mean "This" connection. I mean "This connection."

When I am frightened by the world, and by the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune; when I am tired and worn and weak – I lean upon that inescapable web of interdependent Love; I lean on that Love that will not, cannot let me go.

We all need somebody to lean on. A whole community of bodies to lean on. A whole interdependent web to lean on. To comfort us, to speak for us, to dance with us. For reassurance, forgiveness, compassion.

We all need somebody to lean on. And we are all good for something.

Tom Dorsey had a friend who knew that music could break through shuttered windows of grief. Rebecca Parker had a family who knew that food is love. And, you no doubt have friends who have been good for something in your life.

We are all good for something.

Each one of you is good for something to add to the soup pot for the delicious feast that is this beloved community.

This is my vision.

And I realize I am mixing metaphors between webs and soup pots, but I think you can handle it. My vision is that we become such a caring community, that the weave of our interdependence tightens woof and warp together.

My vision is that we discover every day how deeply we are connected, how deeply we are related. Friend to friend. Acquaintance to acquaintance. Stranger to stranger. We uncover the bonds that bind each to all, so that the weave of our beautiful web is so tightly knit that none fall through the cracks.

When one of us is in pain, or ill, or celebrating or in transition – we know about it and we help out because every one of us is good for something. Maybe Jane Doe broke her leg and you are good for a vegan meal. Maybe John Smith's car is in the shop and you are good for a ride to the doctor's office. Maybe Mary Jane is receiving chemotherapy and you are good for vacuuming her apartment.

This is what community looks like.

This is the covenant we have inherited. And, once we realize it here, we can spread the fabric of our care over our wider and wider communities, and ultimately out into the world.

In Fellowship hour today the Pastoral Care Ministry Team will be standing beside four sign-up sheets that I call the "Good For Lists." There will be a list for those of you who are good for meals. Those of you who are good for transportation. Those of you who are good for household chores. And, those generous souls who are good for whatever comes up. Being on the Good For List is not an onerous task. You might get one or two calls for help a year. You won't be asked to do something you haven't volunteered to do already. And you can always say to the coordinator "No, I am unable to help this time. Please call me again."

I invite you to be part of our congregation's larger pastoral care ministry. Because we all are good for something. Because no one need fall through the cracks. And because we all need somebody to lean on.