

Yom Kippur (day) 5780  
Rabbi Betsy Forester  
Divine Connection

On September 2, I made a rare foray onto my rather pathetic FaceBook page to post a photo in which I am standing with two colleagues at our summer internship graduation. The caption reads: "A rabbi, an almost-priest, and an almost-Lutheran minister walk into a sacred friendship." I looked at the photo a few days ago and felt like I was looking at family I had known my whole life. That did not just happen. Today I want to tell you about it.

Last summer, I wrenched myself away from my regular responsibilities here at Beth Israel Center to complete an internship in clinical pastoral counseling, otherwise known as CPE, which stands for Clinical Pastoral Education. Many of you said to me, "what do you need that for? Your pastoral skills are already strong." I didn't really know what it was that I needed to learn. I expected CPE to be useful, but truth be told, I felt guilty about being out of the office for 13 weeks except for critical situations that might, and did, arise. The most important skill I developed was the ability to connect with others, simply by showing up for people authentically. The big surprise was that in order to show up authentically, I had a lot to learn about myself and the spiritual and emotional power of authentic connection.

I want to share what I learned about that, because although the idea of connection seems simple, it is actually a rare and powerful opportunity that we often squander. As we sit together today before Yizkor, there is something I hope we can learn about how we show up for the people in our lives.

So--I was given a "chaplain" badge and assigned to an intermediate intensive care unit and a Neurology unit. Most of my patients were over 50, with complex health profiles. A typical patient might have pulmonary disease, heart disease, kidney disease, and cancer. Several of my patients were in withdrawal from alcohol or drugs. Many patients presented with significant emotional needs, often related to past trauma. Some were suicidal. I saw many patients over several visits, sometimes over a few weeks or more, and encountered others only briefly. Many of my patients got better and others did not. I met with patients of all faiths. People shared their existential concerns, hopes, and fears with me. Sometimes, we prayed together. I learned a great deal from the patients I met and I am grateful to have had the opportunity to be part of their journeys.

As instructive as the clinical experience was, my learning and growing really grew out of the time I spent with my colleagues. We were two Catholics, an evangelical Christian, a Lutheran, a Buddhist Methodist, and two rabbis--our supervisor and I. We spent about 15 hours each week exploring how we were bringing ourselves to our clinical work, and a large portion of that time was spent processing the triggers and emotions that came up for us. The group became a setting for profound personal transformation because of the ways in which my colleagues and were present and vulnerable to one another. Essentially, we gave to each other what we were offering to our patients. The more we allowed the group to support our personal journeys, the better we were able to flourish in our work with patients and, indeed, in our relationships with the people in our lives outside of the hospital.

One of the most moving things that happened in the group happened wordlessly, and often. Someone would begin to share something that they were feeling--maybe a reaction to an encounter, or a part of their life that had come up as they listened to a patient, or a personal crisis they were experiencing. They would speak until they were done, and no one would look away. No one suddenly had to scratch an itch, close a pen, or organize papers on their desk. Everyone simply lent their presence as a colleague shared a testimony of their life. And then we would continue to sit in quiet, letting the truth fill the room, and holding it together. There might be a question or two, but the main event was the holding. Honestly, it took some getting used to. Our group was half new interns like me and half residents who had much more experience doing this. The three newbies entered a process that had been ongoing for quite some time. I grew to cherish the fragile beauty of that holding space and appreciate the gift we gave to each other through our attention. By the end of 13 weeks, the 6 interns would sit together in silence for the sheer joy of being in one another's presence.

The self-knowledge I gained and the practice of making myself vulnerable allowed me to invite others to be vulnerable with me. Before I started seeing patients, I made myself a little booklet of readings and prayers that I thought I would need. I got halfway through the first one and realized that nothing on a piece of paper could be as powerful as helpful as words that arose in a moment of connection and perception of the needs that spoke to the moment, prayers that were unique to the person who wanted to pray.

I was called to the room of a Jewish woman. She was unconscious, but her brother had heard there was a rabbi in the house, and he wanted me to go and offer a "*Mi Sheberach*." I went and did it. A ritual like that has meaning. But so much was missing because there was no connection. I continued to visit that woman as she recovered. We began to connect when I sang to her in Yiddish. *That* was when she finally opened her

eyes. By the time she was discharged, I really knew her. And by the way, she wasn't at all interested in a "*Mi Sheberach*." But holding my hand and singing old songs, that was meaningful. That was what moved her to express her thoughts and feelings about her condition.

I saw a patient who was recovering from a stroke. Despite her staunch and very public Catholic practice, she was angry and sad about traumatic events in her life when her prayers seemed not to have been received. She felt unjustly punished by God and carried her distress in her heart every day. She told me about her life, and I drew out her feelings from a place of empathy. I know what it is like to be disappointed in, or angry at God. We prayed together, and she told me that my prayer brought her great comfort because she felt it came from my heart, that I understood her deeply and she no longer felt alone. The words I offered up came from both of our hearts, together, because of the connection we experienced. Encounters like that actually happened a lot. I prayed in that connected way with many, many people last summer who had never spoken to a Jew before, let alone a rabbi.

As my internship passed its mid-point, it seemed to me that I was encountering patients with increasingly complex emotional and spiritual needs, but the complexities probably were always there. What had changed was my ability to be a presence in the room that was more genuinely open and accessible, and that was because I was trusting my vulnerability more. We can get closer to people when they can feel that we understand their pain and see ourselves as fellow travelers. I didn't have to share my stories to show real empathy for my patients. They could feel that I understood and could absorb their difficulties. As I deepened my capacity for vulnerability and was held up by my colleagues, my patients felt safer and more held by me because I was grounded in my own reality.

I accompanied a big tough army veteran through a neurological test that caused him to re-live the trauma of abuse from a wildy violent father. We spent hours together during and after the test, processing and working out his terror. I showed up and stayed with him. I brought my own trauma history with me. The details of our trauma were different, but he could tell by my presence that I had enough empathy to go the distance with him. Before he was discharged, he told me that the connection we had shared was life-changing for him. He couldn't put it into words but he wanted to thank me. I knew what he meant.

In my weekly reflection after the 10th week of CPE I wrote: "Clinical work this week was big. There were moments of beauty, moments of sadness, short visits, long visits, and

medium visits. Visits feel deeper than a few weeks ago and I feel myself bringing more personal presence to encounters. I am feeling in flow, like I am going where the Divine Presence takes me, showing up for whatever may be. I have learned that the most important tool I can bring is myself. I am more rooted in who that self is, and more flourishing as a result.

Our tradition understands connection and vulnerability. CPE started out as a Christian organization and in some ways it still feels pretty “not Jewish,” but I think our sages could have created it. Jews place great value on attuned listening and striving to pull out the truths of what is heard. Shema Yisrael, we say--Hear. Pay attention to the truth of our lives. In our Rosh HaShanah Torah reading, we saw God modeling being present for Hagar and Ishmael, accompanying them when Sarah and Abraham have cast them out, showing up not necessarily trying to fix, but to be with them. When Hagar is overwhelmed by anguish and fear, God has an angel call out to her and tell her she is not alone. God models how compassionate presence diminishes people’s despair (Gen. 21:17-20). God models a great deal of emotional vulnerability in the Torah, disclosing regret and anger many times in our Bible. God also shows God’s need, asking for gifts and asking for words of appreciation.

In some rabbinic legends, God cries. When the angel Metatron finds God crying over the destruction of the Temple the angel is uncomfortable with God’s display of vulnerability and says, “Master of the Universe, don’t cry! Let me cry instead.” And God responds: “If you don’t let Me cry in front of you, I will go where you cannot reach me and cry there,” as if to say, “my authentic presence is better than my absence. It is better to be seen and felt--to show vulnerability--than to remove oneself from relationship.” Wow.

I believe that all authentic connection is part of God. Martin Buber wrote a great deal about the Divinity to be found in authentic human connection. Buber is the modern Jewish philosopher who coined the phrase “I-Thou--*Ich und Du*-- relationship” to describe a connection that we can experience with another when we show up for the other purely and authentically, putting aside our ego and judgements and connecting in a spiritual way that thoughts and words cannot capture. He writes, “The lines of relationship intersect in the eternal You. Every single You--meaning, every time we encounter another person with authentic presence--allows us to glimpse the Eternal (*I and Thou*, trans. Walter Kaufmann, New York: Scribners, 1970, p. 123).

The Hasidic masters;use the term *m’sirut nefesh* to refer to self-sublimation, when we put aside our egos and give over our whole soul in prayer or when doing mitzvot. When

we do *m'sirut nefesh*, we let down our defenses and let the Divine Presence fill us. *M'sirut nefesh*, in my experience, also happens when we create space for to hold another person's reality. In opening our hearts to others with generosity and vulnerability, showing up to be present, unguarded, and respectful of the other's humanity, we experience God's presence in a transformational way. I believe that our deep connections with other people feel so powerful precisely *because* they are infused with Divine energy. We actually emerge from the encounter more whole than we were before.

Maybe that's what was going on when I was called to a patient undergoing dialysis. We had spent a few hours together but this day was different. She was dying, and on this day she had become frighteningly aware that she was losing her fight with cancer. She was a tough woman, someone who sometimes made the nurses' job difficult. But now she was terrified. How we moved through her terror and also were able to savor the gift of being alive, singing "What a Wonderful World" together, had everything to do with the trust and connection we had established. She told me how moved she was and how helped she felt by having shared that experience. Needless to say, I felt profoundly moved, too.

There is another story in the Talmud, in which The High Priest enters the Holy of Holies on Yom Kippur and finds God there. And God says to the priest, whose name is Yishmael, "Yishmael, My son, bless me." Yishmael blesses God with a wish God had earlier expressed: "May it be Your will that Your mercy overcome Your anger, and may Your mercy prevail over Your other attributes, and may you act with mercy toward your children, and may You approach them beyond the letter of the law." And in the story, God then nods God's head and accepts the blessing (BT B'rakhot 7a).

When that story appears in the Talmud there is no shock expressed over God's vulnerability. Instead, the editor of the Talmud wants to make a point about the profound power in our hands as human beings when we encounter one another. According to the editor, we are to learn from this story that we should not take for granted the blessings that ordinary people can offer to us. If God asks for and accepts a man's blessing, all the more so, a person must value the blessing that another human being offers (Ibid.).

So let's think shift now and consider for a few minutes about what this business of connection and vulnerability can mean for us in our relationships.

It is so rare in our busy world that people take the time to show up for each other and stay long enough to really hear. Too often we miss the chance to show up for someone

because we are waiting for the “right moment,” or we think it’s “too late, or we think we have nothing helpful to say. Too often, when people begin to speak of their lives, we get nervous. We think we are not qualified to help, or we don’t want to seem nosy. *We can do better.* It’s the difference between saying, “well, if you ever want to talk about that, I’m here” and just being there right then and there, catching and holding someone in their moment of need, because life is tricky, and it helps to be accompanied by people who hear our voice, see us for who we are, and give us their presence to share the journey.

I’m asking all of us to do something simple, but something we often avoid because it seems too hard. I am asking that we pay attention to the people in our lives, that we invite them to be seen and heard.

Can we reach out to the congregant who sits at the end of the row who seems sad? Can we ask our parent about the catch in their voice? Can we let our siblings know we are ready to listen--by calling them up and listening? Can we give our partners time to share who they are right now? I am not asking us to mend fences with the most difficult people in our lives. Maybe someday we will talk about that, but that is not what I am asking for today. Today, I am saying that where it is possible, I would like to think that we can move toward a practice of letting the people in our lives know, on a regular basis: “I see you. I care about you. I love you. I am grateful that you love me.”

I am asking us to slow down so that we can feel another person’s need and take the time to lend them our presence, not waiting for them to call “if they need,” but noticing and acting on the sense you have that they do need you.

I am asking us to listen a little longer before we respond and to listen with our eyes, our hearts, and our ears and nothing else busy--not hands on our phone, not arranging papers on our desk.

I am asking us to risk sharing a little more, because it brings us closer, and “we’re all in this together.”

And, can we sometimes be quiet together? Can we share space and time just *be* together without feeling like we need to speak? I’m asking us to try that.

I am asking that we show up for each other.

We do not need to be able to fix someone's problems to show up for them anyway. Most of the time, our presence will be more than enough. We do not need special skills to show up for the people in our lives. We don't need to have the right answers to listen with our hearts.

I can't tell you how many patients told me they were doing fine, asked for a prayer, and then began to cry when I lingered an extra moment. And they actually had a lot to say and feel. I spent hours with some of those patients who first told me they were doing fine. We can pause for people. We can simply ask, "Is there more?" I have found that very often, there is. I have learned that people usually share as much as they are ready to share. I have learned that our relationships deepen when we show up and stay with people. And our own lives deepen when that happens.

By showing up in these ways, we can make our relationships more real, our world more loving, and our lives more sacred.

I miss my CPE colleagues, yet they are with me even now, because they have seen me for who I am, held me in compassion and helped me to grow--and I did that for them. All relationships come to an end in the physical world. It is not a waste of time to show up with an open heart for the people who are in our lives while they are with us. It is not a waste of energy to be vulnerable.

The last patient I visited in my internship was a man who had undergone surgery. He was in his 50's and had little friend or family presence in his life. At first he was skeptical of me, but then he began to share how he felt about his life, his health, and his purpose in the world. I did a lot of listening and we prayed together. He began to speak with hope about his future and I realized that we had connected quite powerfully simply by being present to each other. I knew that any follow-up chaplain visits would be handled by my successor. I went back to the chaplains office and sat down to chart my last visit. This is my note:

**Visit Details:** Chaplain helped patient process emotions of being overwhelmed and lonely and helped him to look toward his future with renewed hope.

[And I thought: Yes, that is what happened. How does one capture a visit where two people who were perfect strangers only two day before have just cried together, prayed together, and celebrated life together? There are no words for that kind of holiness. But there must be chart note, so I continued...]

**Spiritual Care Provided: Compassionate presence, empathic listening, song, prayer.**

[And then I paused and wrote the one word that said it all:] **“Connection.”**

[There was still one more line to complete.]

**Plan of Action: Continue chaplain visits.**

*My work was done. The next chaplain would need to build their own connection. Chaplaincy was never about me. It was always about something much bigger. I just showed up to do my part. I logged out for the last time, and wept, quietly. I wasn't upset. It was a transition, and there were some tears. My Buddhist methodist colleague stood up and came over to where I was sitting at the computer. She put her hand on my shoulder and stood there and cried with me. And then I was ready to move on. I would have moved on anyway, I would have come back here if she had not done that. I'm good at moving on. But I moved forward better, stronger, and more loved, because she showed up.*

[That is the end of the sermon. Rabbi Forester then showed the congregation the box of “aliyah cards” that our students made to hold the cards of members who had died. She explained why we needed such a box and how we will make it part of our ritual life at BIC.]