

Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of the Rappahannock
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“Think of Me”

At the seminary where I work, I have two jobs. One of them is in the library, and although I don't actually work for the library, that's where my department's office is located. This is a huge advantage to me, because the library staff are some of the most fun people on campus, and the library itself is one of the most beautiful places in Richmond. At one time, there was also the advantage of my office being next to the space where all the discarded books were brought before they were actually discarded. We have a small section near the circulation desk where books are sold for a dollar or fifty cents if they can no longer be used in the collection, but sometimes they are so outdated, or in such bad condition, that they don't even go on the sale shelf. At one time the discards were parked next to my office to wait for the person in charge of the sale shelf to go through them. This meant, of course, that I often got to go through them before the person in charge of the sale shelf, and once in a while I found a genuine treasure. One day I was looking at a very old and beat up volume when a bookmark fell out on to the floor. It's made of a couple of pieces of ribbon, now frayed and faded, and a heavy card stock strip made for cross stitching. The card stock is brittle and broken, and some of the tiny stitches in the carefully planned design have been worn off, but the message is still clear, stitched in red thread: “Think of me”. I picked up the bookmark, very moved, and put it on my desk next to the keyboard, where it has served as a decoration and a reminder ever since.

“Think of me”...who designed and stitched that message, using such a tiny needle and only two strands, or sometimes only one strand, of embroidery floss? Who chose the colors and found just the right ribbon to offset the stitched design? And who in the world did she (I’m assuming it was a “she) want to think of her? What a poignant, tender request! Obviously, I have made a point of thinking about this anonymous stitcher who wanted so much not to be forgotten, and I like to hope that my thinking serves somehow, in ways that I can’t possibly explain, to ease this person’s spirit, wherever she or he is now. No longer alive, I expect, and yet still asking, with this old, worn bookmark, “Think of me.”

“Think of me.” When I began planning for this service, the news was still turbulent with the stories of the two African American men killed by police in Louisiana and Minnesota, and the police who were shot in Dallas, and so many people were asking in despair: what can we do? We have to stop this. How do we make people stop shooting people? *What can we do?* For the most part, we are people from the twentieth century in America, and we have been raised in a culture that teaches us to do things: to set goals, measure outcomes, reorganize the goals based on those measurements. We’ve been taught that by *doing* things, we can reach the goals that we’ve set. We tend to be very attached to the outcomes that we’ve decided on, and we believe our own actions can bring about those, and only those, outcomes. Understandably, we want people to stop shooting each other, and we want it to stop *this afternoon*, for good, and we want racial justice here in our country by next week and throughout the world by the end of the month. We want to start measuring our progress so

that we can see where we need to do more, and learn from places where we are seeing success. That's the way we know how to operate.

You already know that I'm going to tell you that when it comes to culture shifts, that's not how it happens. We live in dark times in the history of the world, and this is not the first or last time for that darkness. Our devotion to goals and measurements and action is not going to serve us or save us in these dark times, but *these times* are where we are living at this moment in history, and *these times* are where we need to live fully, and *these times* are where we need to have courage and do good and keep hope alive and strong. Fortunately, we know how to do that.

Someone might be asking, "Are you sure? Are you sure we know how to do that?" Yes, I *am* sure, and I have faith in our power. There are many things we can do that serve and sustain the good and keep hope alive, and one of them is brought to life in that bookmark that sits next to my keyboard at work: "think of me". This may mean different things to different people. Mainline denominations and ancient Christians call it praying for people, although that in itself may have meant something different to ancient Christians from what we take it to mean today. Quakers call it holding people in the light. Those with no religious affiliation may call it, just as this bookmark calls it, thinking of them. Keeping those who have been killed this summer on our minds keeps them and their circumstances alive in the conscience of this nation, and that means that from now on, nothing can be exactly the same. More people may have to die along this slow and torturous and rocky path to change, but as long as we are

thinking of them, we are going to keep moving forward, bit by bit, on the path.

Action is not the only thing that has power. As much as we long for it, as much as we believe in it, action is not everything. Some would say praying is not everything either, and I agree. I remember some song lyrics that said something like, “there are plenty of people praying for peace, and if praying were enough it would have come to be.” Thinking about people, working to understand their deaths, their struggles, their oppression, is not everything-- but it is not nothing.

Sometimes our culturally defined need for action shows up in ways that are profoundly touching. After the shootings in Dallas, Facebook showed a sign at Lewis Ginter Botanical Gardens in Richmond. The sign said; *In light of events that have affected our world in recent months, weeks, and days: if it would be of help to you to enter the garden for free, please do so.* What a tender gesture! The garden is a vast beautiful space, cared for by volunteers who love it and want to be there. The people who manage the garden and who have to be concerned with its financial wellbeing made a choice to put finances lower on the list of priorities so that grieving, heartbroken people could come and rest in the grace of quiet green space, surrounded by flowers and trees and living water. No gun control legislation was passed as a result of that invitation. Police still oppress African American men all over the country. But the people at Lewis Ginter Botanical Gardens were thinking of us, thinking of despairing people all over the city, and they offered help and comfort and recognition and shared mourning in the best way they knew how. They contributed to the

good that is still alive in this world. Their invitation to come to the garden without paying is not enough to change everything, but it is absolutely not nothing.

The gesture from the botanical garden reminded me of a story that a friend of mine told years ago. Their baby was born with severe birth defects and died when he was two weeks old. My friend took his suit to the dry cleaner and said, "I have to have this for my son's funeral tomorrow. Can you have it ready in the morning?" The cleaner said of course, and when my friend returned the next day to pick up his suit, the cleaner said there's no charge for this. The dry cleaner did not know my friend or his family; he did not know what happened. He only knew that he had cleaned a suit for a man whose child had died. He thought of my friend, thought of his family, and did what he *could* do. There was no action he could take to make things different. He recognized and acknowledged my friend's pain, and stood beside him as he grieved. The gesture of thinking of my friend, of cleaning his suit as a gift, did not change anything or fix anything, but it was not nothing.

In the face of appalling brutality and injustice and oppression, shared grief matters. Anguish matters. Caring for others in small ways matters. Thinking of people matters. As I've told you before, I am a friend of the Christian sacred text, and I find tremendous sustenance and comfort in the stories in it. Jesus hung out with people that the privileged people thought were unacceptable: people that were poor, people that didn't do right. He ate with them and chose them and told them they were good. Before Jesus was ever born, the stories say that the prophets knew he was coming, and

they promised that things were not going to stay the way they had been. The downtrodden were not going to be downtrodden forever. One of the stories about Jesus that I cherish is the one where he told his friends, “When I was hungry, you brought me food. When I was naked, you brought me clothes. When I was in prison you came to me.” They were confused and said we never did that, what are you talking about? And Jesus told them any time you do those things for the least of my sisters and brothers, it’s just the same as doing it for me. I believe that when he says the least of my sisters and brothers, he also means the worst of them—the ones who do horrible things to others, the ones who hate others, the ones who destroy things that are beautiful. But anything that we do for the least of those, for the worst of those, serves and strengthens the goodness that is alive in the world and that will stay alive in the face of evil.

When we feel the need to act and can’t find any action that satisfies that need, we can rest in the understanding that action is not the only thing that does good. We grieve together, we comfort each other, we care for others, and we think of them. We think not only of the oppressed but also of the oppressors in a spirit of mercy and compassion, and we decide to hope. As I’ve said before, hope is not a feeling that we feel—that’s optimism. We don’t feel optimism all the time, and in the past weeks and months it has been especially difficult to feel optimistic. That’s okay. We don’t have to feel it all the time. Hope, though, is different. Hope is a decision that we make; hope is a choice. As we think of each other, as we think even of the worst among us, we hope. We choose to contribute to the good in the world by whatever means we have, and we choose the possibility of a better way even when we cannot see it in front of us or

figure out any action that will make it appear immediately. Keeping hope alive and strong through the way we act with our friends and our enemies is what's going to change things, ever so slowly, but absolutely.

And so may it be.