

THE FOUR THINGS THAT MATTER MOST

A Sermon Delivered at
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Panchi's tufts of cottony white hair sat upon her beautiful, brown, wrinkled brow like clouds atop an ancient mountain... the crackling of her labored breathing, could hardly be heard above the constant coming and going of four generations gathered to witness and accompany her on her final journey home... Nothing and everything had prepared me for this moment... As the only Spanish speaking chaplain, I had been called to offer the family support and prayers... It was my first solo night on call at St. Luke's hospital and I had never seen anyone actively dying before... Would my nerves get in the way? What prayers should I use? Armed with la Santa Biblia under one wing, and the UU hymnal under the other, I entered the liminal space of room P565 where a vigil had begun ...

As people greeted me with hugs and warm handshakes, I eventually let go of the books... I made my way to the bed and knelt down to greet the matriarch who had walked this earth for over a century... The next 24 hours were filled with prayers of every kind, songs, charismatic hymns I remembered from my youth choir days, and moving stories about Panchi as a new immigrant coming to the Lehigh Valley, where she raised her 15 children, 35 grandchildren, and 5 great grandchildren... all of whom in one way or another took turns saying "Te Amo", "I love you", "perdoname" "forgive me", "I'll miss you" "te voy a extranar" and "gracias" "thank you", not only to Panchi, but also to each other...

By the time Panchi took her last breath, I had learned a few important lessons: There is no perfect prayer, prayer comes from

the heart, it must reflect and respond to the individual situation, and is often interrupted by tears, laughter, babies crying, nurses barging in to fix the morphine drip, and the unexpected crackling voice whispering “Dios Te Bendiga Mija” “God Bless you my daughter”... pastoral care is about being present, so living in the moment is key... showing up is the most important thing... Does this resonate with you? How many times have we obsessed over the perfect moment to open our hearts, to broach a difficult topic which might lead to conflict, but potentially also to forgiveness and wholeness...?

Please forgive me.

I forgive you.

Thank you.

I love you.

In his book: “The Four Things that Matter Most” Dr. Ira Byock identifies these statements as powerful tools for improving our relationships and our lives. He says they are not to be used

exclusively at the time when someone is dying, but can be employed anytime at all. While he acknowledges the “rough spots” of every relationship, he believes that when you love someone, it is never too soon to say “I love you” or premature to say “thank you” “I forgive you” or “Will you please forgive me?”

Of course we know it's not easy. Even during Panchi's loving, harmonious, and seemingly conflict free vigil, I witnessed the heart wrenching reconciliation of two brothers who had not spoken to each other in 18 years. I also noticed those who remained silent, detached, perhaps praying and grieving in their own way. And I will never forget one of the granddaughters, a 16 year old who cried softly as she tried to list all the things she had never said to her grandmother, always thinking she'd have more time...She told Panchi that she would miss her café con leche in the morning, she asked her what color she should pick for her prom dress, and chuckled when she told her that her girlfriends still don't believe it was Panchi who taught her the first wild and sensuous steps of salsa and merengue... she had lived in the same

house as Panchi all her life, yet had not connected with her to share all things with her as they were happening...In her own way, she was saying “please forgive me” “I love you” “thank you”.

After almost 600 hours at St. Luke’s hospital, I had the opportunity - and the blessing - to witness a wide variety of situations each unique, reflective of particular family dynamics, and sacred in its own way. There were vigils where I was the only one to show up to say goodbye, but even sadder were those turned into a battlefield by feuding relatives holding on to old grudges, or trying to impose their will, and having a shouting match right there in front of the person who perhaps only had a few hours to live. But more often than not, I saw people struggling to hold on, struggling to let go, to make some sense of what they were going through, to make meaning out of pain, loss, and death... I was often asked why this was happening to them, why God would want to punish them by taking their precious babies, loving husband, dear wife, sister, mother... and why should they want to continue living? It’s hard to describe how I answered those tough questions,

I don't even think I remember, and I tried hard to stay away from platitudes and cheap philosophies... [sometimes I was more successful than others] Sometimes the only answer I had was "I don't know, perhaps we will never know why, but I do believe that love does not disappear... you will miss your loved one terribly, and I hope that in time you can allow yourself to believe that for whatever amount of time we have love in our lives, it touches us, challenges & transforms us, bringing us to our best or worse selves, its energy living on to remind us that we are human, imperfect and incomplete: that to be human is to miss and need one another... we measure time and love by its depth, not its length...

It is said that the word complete doesn't always imply finality. On the one hand, a relationship can be complete, but not necessarily end. On the other hand, a relationship may end, yet remain incomplete.

Dr. Byock states and I quote: "We are complete in our relationships when we feel reconciled, whole and at peace. People say they feel complete when if they were to die tomorrow, they'd

have no regrets-they would feel that they had left nothing undone... or unsaid. Saying the four things can help us attain this sense of completion and renew the circle of our most significant relationships, reclaiming the life affirming love from which they began.”

“A deep natural drive to connect with others lies at the heart of what it means to be human. The four things can help you discover opportunities to enliven all your important relationships-with your children, parents, relatives, and close friends. You need not wait until you or someone you love is seriously ill. By taking the time and by caring enough to express forgiveness, gratitude and affection, you can renew and revitalize your most precious connections.”

What are our most precious connections?

Do we need to come current in our relationships?

What are we struggling to hold on to or let go?

When I left my native Chile, I was 16 years old...I didn't get to finish my senior year, and missed graduating with my class. I

also didn't get a chance to say goodbye to my friends. We had survived as best we could the military coup, living under martial law, the disappearance of our relatives, and despite our precarious situation, we managed to laugh and in some way remind each other that despite the horrors, life was wonderful, exciting, inviting us to read and write poetry [bad poetry believe me], translate John Lennon's and Cat Steven's songs, learn Buddhist meditations, explore transcendentalism, enter dance contests [and win!] When the streets were too dangerous even in the daytime, we sought refuge in the church, joined the youth choir, and sought desperately every opportunity to sing and laugh and be... After I left, and for nearly thirty years, my heart felt incomplete without the presence of my friends. I wonder if I had the chance then, would I have said goodbye? Would I have said forgive me, thank you, I love you? Probably not... But the universe in its wisdom, decided to give me a second chance this summer. I had just discovered Dr. Byock's book in the hospital's library, when I began receiving emails from my friends in Chile. One of them had googled me and the first

page that came up was First Parish's web page. In all the emails I received, after telling me a little bit about work and family, the person said "forgive me for allowing so much time to pass without trying to contact you" followed by "I forgive you for not writing to me - and for breaking my heart"... In a subsequent message, in response to my coming out and expressing fear that they might reject me, they replied: "Thank you for your honesty. Thank you for always risking being your true self. I love you my friend. And one of them said "I knew it already before writing to you. I admit I have been prejudiced and have much to learn in that regard..."

Wow! To restore closeness, and to experience the unexpected grace of reconnection. What a gift! What joy! When I replied and followed his example, the peace and the joy I felt in my heart was indescribable. I then did the same with my other friends, until our circle was complete. We all shared a sense of wellbeing, beyond luck, because we had consciously chosen to reach out, to reconnect. We had defied the odds, we had survived the state of siege, teen angst, bad poetry, bad relationships, and lived to tell the

stories. We all have children the same age, and we are all excited about the possibility of taking a trip together and explore southern Chile with our families. More than a high school reunion, it will be a pilgrimage to visit the places in our hearts which saw us muster strength and give each other hope when all around us the world negated our right to be, repressed our dreams, and tried to bury our laughter. It will be interesting to see what actually happens and if there is a reunion of sorts, but for me the important thing is to have been found, to have been forgiven and to have forgiven, to have said I love you and thank you, leaving nothing unsaid and only the hope that we will be granted the opportunity to see each other once again. Undoubtedly, saying the four things to this group of friends pales in comparison to being able to do it with relatives who have been abusive, or loved ones dealing with difficult diagnosis. But it's a start.

I Love you?

Forgiving is not exonerating

For me, this reconnection has become a sort of spiritual practice, where saying the four things just flows as the relationship unfolds. We all have to start somewhere, and the more we practice with those closest, then we can venture and try the four things on those who are distant from our hearts.

To be sure, my summer experience as a hospital chaplain did not result in any major epiphanies. It was an opportunity to take stock of my relationships, practice gratitude, and experience the healing power of words, and “Expanding the realm of the possible”. Byock says that life is a sexually transmitted condition with a terminal prognosis... I have come to understand viscerally that we live every moment on the brink. We are, each one of us, at every moment, a heartbeat away from death. Seen against our certain mortality, our differences are dwarfed by our commonality- and the importance we hold for one another.

Dear Friends, May we use the four things to restore closeness; to experience the healing power of words; to complete relationships and, to come current in our relationships;

May we use the four things to enjoy the unexpected grace of reconnection, until there is nothing left unsaid.

And may we measure time and love by its depth, not its length...

In this journey as your intern minister, you and your children have become one of my precious connections, and as I begin a new church year with you, I'd like the opportunity to come current with our relationship. Please forgive me. I forgive you. Thank you. I love you.