

I have found in my work as a hospital chaplain that I want to hear people pray out loud. Often hospital chaplaincy includes prayer, but most often I am doing the praying, or if a patient joins, the prayers are soft and the blessings are brief. All I want in this moment is loud, maybe even in your face prayers. More than ever I have realized (as many of us I am sure have) how little control I truly have. I put on gowns, gloves, protective glasses and sometimes feel that with all of this equipment, I should be able to do more. But then again, I always feel I should be able to do more. During this pandemic I am unable to go into as many rooms, we are not allowed to hold hands, my mask is always on, I pray into door cracks, I take pauses with nurses, and remember I don't actually have any more control than I did before the pandemic. I have never been a doctor, I have never been able to heal, instead I try every day to do what we did during the pastoral prayer. I try to fill myself with all the suffering and breathe out beauty, wonder, and

compassion to everyone. I have so many visits where the patient and I talk about giving this suffering up to God, praying that God takes their pain. Secretly, when this happens, I don't give it to God, I take it myself. God for me isn't always a guarantee, so I take in the suffering, and then grow expansive enough that the suffering cannot hurt me. I take the suffering in and assure my body that I will hold on to it and when I cannot hold it anymore I will try my hardest to breathe it out, to give out compassion to everyone that I can.

As a hospital chaplain, I have many visits that begin or end with the question of 'why is this happening to me?' which can often lead to 'why is God punishing me?' During this time of COVID-19, I also receive the question 'Why is God punishing us?' Or even just the statement '*I know God is punishing us.*'

When confronted with these questions I feel that I am being asked to discern what purpose God serves in the lives of my patients.

After checking in with the nurse to make sure the patient is NOT Covid positive, I enter the room with mask and eye protection and wonder how I can address these questions. Some patients realize while asking these questions that they *don't actually believe* in a God that punishes, while others cling to the idea that they must finally divulge past deeds that they believe they are being punished for.

Other patients will realize they don't actually believe in any sort of God. No matter where they find themselves in their belief, when I hear them ask this question of 'why me?' what I mostly hear is a lot of fear and loneliness.

What I think is often behind this, is a very simple feeling of abandonment, sometimes by God or a God-like force of some sort. At times the *very fact of being* at a hospital gives patients a sense of abandonment and fear as they struggle to know who has their best interests at hand and if providers are doing enough to help them. People may not necessarily want to know if God is punishing them or if that is even a thing God does, ***but they want to know that God hasn't left them, they want to know that they are not alone.***

As a Unitarian Universalist minister and chaplain, it is not my job to tell you, my patients, or anyone whether there is a God or even what forms of God may exist or may not exist. But I do feel it is my job to help people find, as we did in our meditation the capacity in themselves to take in suffering and breathe out compassion.

In her most recent podcast the writer Cheryl Strayed tells a story of driving through a storm with her first husband and their car kept slipping off the road. Cheryl describes continually yelling at her husband to ‘get control of the car.’

He was unable to stop, and the car went off the road and sailed through the air. There was a ditch next to the road, but as Cheryl describes it, it was far off and she felt like they were flying **for a long time**. In that moment, before the car hit the ground, they both thought they were going to die, so they turned to one another and said ‘I love you.’

This is a perfect example of what I believe God is. I believe God is a force activated when people choose or maybe do not even choose, but naturally do love beyond themselves. Cheryl describes that moment, not one of panic, but of complete calm.

In the same podcast Cheryl talks with the writer Judy Blume who shares a piece from her book “In the Unlikely Event.” Judy and Cheryl have been talking about the pandemic and when calamity strikes. She recites a part from her book when a teenager named Miri is talking to her mother, Rusty, about if she believes in God.

“ When Miri asked if she believed in God, what was she supposed to say? Of course I believe in God, she told her. But how could God let such a terrible thing happen? It’s not God’s job to decide what happens, Rusty said. It’s his job to help you get through it.”

I don’t think that God, or this force whether it be a huge hoard of Goddesses, a tree, or the power of love, *solely* has a job to get you through it, I believe the job goes beyond that. The ever so tricky job of getting you through in a way that *also sustains* you to help someone else get through it.

**Now something I have had some of, but not enough is the
aforementioned in your face out loud prayers. So I think we should
do some praying. I know not all of us pray, so I invite us all to think
of three words that you would like to put out into the world. You
can think of it as a prayer, and pray it out loud, you can think of it
as a cathartic shout and shout it out, you can think of it as a poem
to write and recite it, it is all these things and the important part is
to hear all of our voices together. I will invite you to take a few
moments to think on your words and then you will be unmuted and
you will say your words right after I say “we lift our voices up and
make them LOUD.”**

In a facebook post about coronavirus, the doctor and disease specialist
Abdu Sharkawy writes about his main fear at this time of confusion,
cancellations, and hysteria. He writes:

‘Mostly, I’m scared about what messages we are telling our kids when faced with a threat. Instead of reason, rationality, open mindedness, and altruism, we are telling them to panic, be fearful, suspicious, reactionary, and self-interested. Our own behaviour and “fight for yourself above all else” attitude could prove disastrous.’

He goes on to say: “I implore all of you. Temper fear with reason, panic with patience and uncertainty with education. Let’s meet this challenge together in the best spirit of compassion for others, patience, and above all, an unfailing effort to seek truth, facts and knowledge as opposed to conjecture, speculations and catastrophizing. Facts not fear. Clean hands open hearts.”

I think it is hard to have open hearts at this time. We are living in wild times, times where for many of us it feels that things are unraveling. T. Thorn Coyle in a social media post writes a dialogue that goes:

What did you do during the Great Unraveling?

We sent each other images of flowers and baby animals, encouraging one another to take heart.

What else?

We told stories, We shared food and clean water with those who had none.

And?

We did our best to be human.

In this time, this time of unraveling, we are all suffering, some more than others. We may only know some of them, we may not know any of them, but let us find ways to love them, let us ask ourselves in what

ways can we love them? What can we do so that when our car has gone off the road, we *don't* cover our faces but instead turn to each other and say 'I love you.'

This love may look like activism, donations, social distancing, mutual aid, it may include voting. It may include talking, crafting, and imagining not only a world after COVID, but a better world, a world in which we support our immigrant neighbors instead of imprison them. Where those of us that are white, not only speak out, but become educated and commit to being anti-racist in a way that brings down white supremacy. A world in which we care more greatly for our earth where we take in the suffering and start actively breathing out compassion.

We did our best to be human. A task that humanity currently seems to be struggling with. The God I personally believe in is a force, activated

when people love. God for me is that moment of calm, of non-panic when all that is on your mind **is love**, *even* when faced with death. For me God isn't always here, but the potential for God is. Often, it is a force activated when people love people, but also when people love the earth, an animal, love the ocean, a poem, art, and it is especially activated when people love people they do not know, people they have never met.

This type of love, the love that activates the God force more than anything I know, brings me the most hope. This hope and the ability to believe in our own power enables us to do our best to be human, to breathe out **more compassion** than we thought possible.

Let us take heart in our ability to breathe out compassion even when we are filled to the brim with suffering. Let us take heart in the prayers, poems, and love spoken today. Let us remember how beautiful it sounded when our voices combined and let us raise them loud again and again.

