

Can You Fix Me?

(Version 3a)

A Sunday service led by the
Reverend Michael Walker, Interim Minister

Presented on December 4, 2016, at the
Unitarian Church of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania

WELCOME

Dear friends, some who are new, some who are not, you are welcome here – one and all. We are a welcoming community which honors the inherent worth of all people, regardless of age, ethnicity, gender, orientation, socio-economic class, or other attributes that only serve to divide our society. Here, we welcome you as you are, and are glad you came to be with us today. You may have been coming here for years, even decades; or you may have been coming here for just a few weeks; or, this might even be your first time here, ever. Regardless of how long you have been here, we have one thing to say to you all: **Welcome Home!** Please take a few moments now to greet your neighbors.

CALL TO WORSHIP (by Ed A. Lane)¹

*This earthen chalice was born of clay and water,
the flesh and blood of Gaia;
Given form by the hand of the potter,
set by the bonding fire of the kiln.
As we touch the flame to her lips,
joining fire and air,
May her light remind us of that unity
of earth, air, fire, and water,
of plant and animal, human and mineral,
that we and the earth are one.*

May it ever be so and blessed be you all!

¹ Lane, Ed A. in *Sources of Our Faith*, Kathleen Rolenz, ed. (Boston: Skinner House, 2012.) p.137

CHILD DEDICATION (Clover Lane only)**OPENING WORDS**

– Rev. Michael Walker

Friends, this is one of the happiest occasions in the life of a congregation. Today, we dedicate a child and pledge our collective commitment to safeguarding her -- one of our youngest members, Annabelle Victoria Stone. Nikki and Ben Stone-Thonus, will you please come forward with Bella? Let's also invite forward Bella's big brother, Jackson, and god-parents, William & Courtney Maurer. Thank you.

The poet Kahlil Gibran wrote:

“Your children are not your children. They are the sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself. They come through you but not from you, and though they are with

you yet they belong not to you. You may give them your love but not your thoughts, for they have their own thoughts. You may house their bodies but not their souls, for their souls dwell in the house of tomorrow, which you cannot visit, not even in your dreams. You may strive to be like them, but seek not to make them like you. For life goes not backward nor tarries with yesterday.”

ADDRESS TO CONGREGATION AND FAMILY

– Sara Palmer, DRE and Rev. Michael Walker

Sara:

The ceremony in which we now share is both ancient and timeless. In all parts of the earth, and from the earliest days of recorded history, parents have brought their children at an early age to a place of

worship, sharing their joy and dedication with those of the wider community.

Traditionally, the element of water has played a symbolic part in this ceremony, for all life has arisen from the waters, and it is through water that life is sustained as it flows forward like a river.

Mike:

Traditionally, at our service of dedication, we welcome those at the beginning of their time with us into our church community by giving them roses – tightly closed buds, on stems from which the thorns have been removed. The buds are symbols of life just beginning, whose unfolding they will experience, petal by petal. The thornless stems are vivid images of our deep desire

to protect the children of our church family from all that could be hurtful – to make their paths smooth as their lives unfold.

Traditionally, this is also the time to recognize our children by name, for it is by name that each of us is acknowledged as a unique and separate person. The flower we present is also symbolic of the individuality we wish to affirm.

ADDRESS TO PARENTS AND GOD-PARENTS

Sara:

Nikki and Ben, to you as parents let me say this: In presenting your child at this service, you invite all of us to share some of the joy and responsibility that is yours as parents. You seek our support in your

dedication to the task of fostering, with love and guidance, the fullest unfolding of the personality of your child.

Do you now promise that, to the best of your human abilities, you will help this child to an appreciation of truth and beauty, uprightness of character, and love? If so, say, “We do.”

William and Courtney: Have you agreed to serve as god-parents to this beautiful little girl? Do you pledge to help her, her brother and parents in times of need? Do you pledge your support for her as she grows up?

DEDICATION

Mike:

Ben and Nikki, by what name is this child to be known?

Annabelle Victoria Stone-Thonus, in the manner of our ancestors, I touch your brow with water from nature’s infinite sky, water that flows around the world and nourishes all life on Earth. In so doing, we dedicate your life to the good of all and to your own growing into the self you will become.

We also give you this flower, unique in all its natural beauty, separate and distinct from all other flowers found in creation, to express symbolically our hope that all your life long you will unfold and blossom

just as you must, in all of your own unique and natural beauty.

PARENT’S AFFIRMATION

– Led by Rev. Michael Walker

I love you. I am your parent; you are my child.

There is no more sacred bond.

In all the days and years to come,

I promise you my loving care,

Providing you both roots and wings,

That you may feel safe, that you may one day fly.

I am glad you have entered my life. I love you.

- Lindsay Bates

CONGREGATIONAL RESPONSE

– Led by Sara Palmer, DRE

May you grow to love only that which is good;

May you seek and attain that good.

May you learn to be gentle and respect all persons;

May you be filled with courage to challenge evil;

May you endow those who know you with faith and hope;

May you come to know that which is eternal;

May love abide with you always.

BLESSING OF THE CHILD

Mike:

May we be grateful for the gift of children in our lives.

Though we cannot save them from trials or sorrow, we can show how much we love them.

Though we cannot make them into people of our choosing, we can be generous with positive recognition and celebrate their triumphs and support what is unique and special.

As they learn from their time with us, so shall we learn from them as we anticipate the day when they shall stand with us, challenging us and offering us new companionship.

- Cheryl Jack

JOYS AND SORROWS (Market Street)

During our time of Silent Joys and Sorrows, we acknowledge those things we hold in hearts, whether they be joyful or sad. If you wish to mark some joy or sorrow in your personal life, you're invited to come and choose a disc from the heart-basket; hold it, admire it, imagine your joy or sorrow coming to reside in this symbol.

Of course, these can mean whatever you want them to, but we picked out the colors based on the sky. Joys might be blue for clear skies or yellow for sunny skies, while the dark stones can symbolize your sorrows, as an overcast or stormy sky. If you have a joy or sorrow you wish to acknowledge, please come forward.

MEDITATION

Being a caring community, we *celebrate* the joys and *share* the sorrows, whether we have told others about them or hold onto them in silence. We do so, so that our friends do not carry these alone. You are now invited into a moment of silence and meditation, as we hold these joys and these sorrows in our hearts and minds. We will bring our meditation to a conclusion by joining in singing a Musical Meditation, Hymn # _____, _____ (name) in the (grey/teal) hymnal.

[Silence]

Thank you. Blessed be.

OFFERING

[Insert story]

If you are here for the first time, we invite you to let the offering basket pass you by, because you are our honored guest. And if you have made this your spiritual home, we thank you for your continuing generosity.

Every month, we also collect donations during the Offering to support a worthy cause. This month, our Share-the-Plate Recipient is _____.

If you are writing a check, please specify on the Memo line whether this is for your Pledge, an offering to UCH, or for the Share-the-Plate recipient.

Thank you, all, for your generosity. This morning's offering will now be received.

Can You Fix Me?

Reverend Michael Walker

As we head into the holidays, our worship theme for the month is *Helping Others and Ourselves*. Being there to help each other is a good thing, but it also has the potential of becoming... too much.

A person I once knew seemed to be saying to me, “*I’m a mess – can you fix me?*” Not in so many words, but it seemed like she needed someone to tell her what to do, because she just didn’t know for herself what she needed to do. She placed so much trust and responsibility on my shoulders, as a leader in a religious

group that we were both part of several years ago. As it turns out, I could not fix her – but she did, eventually fix herself. But why did this dilemma arise in the first place?

I think men and women have had this problem forever, and it has long been the impulse of well-meaning people – such as those in ministry and other helping professions – to try to help them. But, if we do help them, what form should our help take? Should we try to fix the problems of others, who seem incapable of fixing them for themselves? Should we demand that they ‘buck up’ and face their issues head-on, without any assistance? Or, should we just provide moral support and a caring presence, while they muddle around with their own problems? Can we find a more balanced approach?

It seems to me that *brokenness* is a state of being that happens to all of us, from time to time. That's okay – it's part of life. When the toaster is broken, you can get it fixed. But when something within us is broken, we sometimes need help, although we are ultimately responsible to fix it ourselves. We cannot really mend someone else's life... Only our own.

I'd like to bring up some ideas from a popular self-help book, *Codependent No More* by Melody Beattie. She teaches that the impulse to fix other people is – for some – based in their need to *control* the other people in their lives. She calls this impulse 'rescuing' and 'caretaking,' and she writes:

Rescuing and caretaking mean almost what they

*sound like. We rescue people from their responsibilities. We take care of people's responsibilities for them. Later we get mad at them for what we've done. Then we feel used and sorry for ourselves.*²

Beattie is very clear, later in that chapter, that she is not talking about acts of love and kindness – “the good stuff of life.” She is talking about taking on the responsibilities of another person, without them asking us to, because we unconsciously assume that they are incapable or maybe even incompetent. I think this may be hard to hear – very hard... I share it because I know that I have done these things myself. I know that this

² Beattie, Melody, *Codependent No More*, (Center City, MN: Hazelden, 1992), p. 84.

was one reason for the end of my past long-term relationship many years ago.

Let me describe this *rescuing* and *caretaking* in a little more detail. Have you ever:

- Done something you didn't want to do?
- Said *yes* when you meant *no*?
- Done something for someone else, that they are capable of doing for themselves?
- Consistently given more than you received?
- [Have you ever] spoken for another person?
- Thought someone else's thoughts for them?
- Fixed their feelings?
- [And...last... Have you ever] suffered someone else's consequences instead of letting that person suffer them?³

I know that I have done this before. It is a fine line to

³ Ibid., paraphrased from 84-85.

walk, between being a *caring* person and a *caretaking* person. There were times in my life that I now realize I should've saved my caretaking efforts for patients in the hospital, and not for my former partner at home. You see, it is a short trip from here to a place of resentment. A short trip from codependency to resentment.

One of the great lessons of my life, *in relationship*, has been that I needed to listen and be supportive, without trying to solve whatever issue my former partner faced. I thought I was showing that I cared when I tried to help him fix every little thing. But, over time, he began to resent that he didn't have any room to solve his own problems. I was surprised to realize that, long after it was too late. I had been *caretaking*, rather than *caring*.

This is where one of our Unitarian luminaries, Ralph Waldo Emerson, would draw the line. He insisted on **self-reliance** as a remedy for what is now often referred to as ‘*codependency*.’ For a different perspective, I found myself revisiting Emerson’s essay, “Self-Reliance.” Of course, jargon like codependency, rescuing, enabling, etc., wasn’t in use in his day, but he had surely witnessed the behavior, because he strongly castigated his fellow man for behaving in any way that was not self-reliant.

Because I usually go to Emerson for his words about nature and the divine, I tend to forget his position on the human condition. It shocks me to know that Emerson did not favor the work of caring ministries, whatsoever. In fact, he abhorred any type of relief

society, charity, or other effort that worked to improve the human condition. Rather, it was Emerson’s position that an honorable person was a **self-reliant** person. It seemed dishonorable to him, to ask the question that started off this sermon, “*can you fix me?*” It was a weakness, in his eyes, to even ask, “*can you help me?*”

In light of economic struggles in the world around us today – and in light of the work this church does to help *people in need* – I was a bit shocked to read the following words by Emerson:

...do not tell me, as a good man did to-day, of my obligation to put all poor men in good situations. Are they my poor? I tell thee, thou foolish philanthropist, that I grudge the dollar, the dime, the cent I give to such men as do not belong to me

*and to whom I do not belong. There is a class of persons to whom by all spiritual affinity I am bought and sold; for them I will go to prison if need be; but your miscellaneous popular charities; [...] the building of meeting-houses to the vain end to which many now stand; alms to [drunks], and the thousand-fold Relief Societies; — though I confess with shame I sometimes succumb and give the dollar, it is a wicked dollar, which by and by I shall have the manhood to withhold.*⁴

Emerson's position serves to remind us that there is a wide variety of thought within the UU movement. Just ten years after Emerson published his Essays (including

⁴ Emerson, Ralph Waldo, "Self-Reliance" in *The Portable Emerson*, Carl Bode, ed. (New York: Penguin, 1987), pp. 142-143.

the one on self-reliance), one of his protégés, Thomas Starr King was becoming well known for taking the opposite position on social justice and philanthropy. King was the most prolific fundraiser for the *American Sanitary Commission* (which was the predecessor of the modern *American Red Cross*), whose mission *at that time* was to provide safe and sanitary medical care on the Civil War battlefields. Clearly, a battlefield is a place where self-reliance becomes a form of stubbornness that could lead to death.

I realize that I've just been talking about the views of a couple of dead guys from history. And, it may seem that I'm comparing apples to oranges, when talking about people in need of medical support, as opposed to people in need of moral support. So, let me share with you a

more recent story that shows how these kinds of support may become intertwined and enmeshed with each other.

I once served in a medical unit that supported a Marine battalion, and we were doing training exercises deep in the Mojave Desert, 50 miles from the nearest town – if you could even call 29 Palms a town. I and a couple of other medics had made a trip back to base for supplies, and were returning to the training area late at night. We were in an old Humvee – a real Hummer, not the dolled-up variety that celebrities are driving these days. Those old Vietnam Era vehicles were unreliable, their headlights were substandard for today’s highways – in general, these vehicles would never pass DMV requirements. But this is what we had to us. So, we

three medics were barreling down this highway to nowhere. I was driving, my boss was sitting next to me, and another guy was sleeping on the flatbed in back.

In the darkness, with insufficient illumination for dark desert conditions, the dirt road leading to the training area came up suddenly on the left, so I turned abruptly. I did not realize, until it was too late, that a civilian pickup truck that had been far behind us had been speeding and veered into the left lane, trying to pass us. The pickup collided with the rear driver-side of the Hummer, spinning us around. The Humvee had no airbags – the doors were made of canvas, on metal and plastic frames. The steering wheel was unpadded and also without an airbag. I hit my head on the steering wheel and momentarily blacked out. When I came to, I

turned to the passenger – my boss – who was also my friend. I was overwhelmed with a sense of horror and fear when I saw he was not there in the passenger seat.

The man sleeping in the back had been rolled around a bit, but was uninjured; the driver of the other vehicle had airbags and was also uninjured. During all of this, I didn't notice I was bleeding from the scalp – I only thought of my friend as I dashed out of the truck, running around, trying to find him. I found him several yards from the truck, lying unconscious in a ditch. I assessed him for injuries and then sat there holding his spine in a certain way – called a C-Spine Precaution. Meanwhile, the other medic found our field radio – because cell phones don't work out there – but the radio was broken in several pieces. He was a career medic and not an

electrician, but somehow, somehow, he got that radio working and was able to call for airlift. A helicopter was dispatched to fly us back to the nearest hospital, 50 miles away. Our boss, in the ditch, was still unconscious.

Fast forward... the boss lived, treated for physical injuries. The guy sleeping in the back was fine, as was the other driver. But then, there was myself. I was scarred. Well, the scar on my scalp may be fairly minor. But the scar in my heart – well, that comes with the persistent fear of having the safety of others in my charge and then letting them down. That old fear that I might have killed my friend... That has been a difficult scar to carry. Once in a while, I still have dreams about that night. It is a form of brokenness – clearly self-reliance was not part of this story – each of us relied on the others

for our survival. And, although it turned out all right, it highlights for me a bit of my own brokenness, my own helplessness, an area in which I have found that I need others to help me. I still carry those scars – and, over time, I have asked for help and forgiveness. I want to lift up this idea to you – that it is okay to ask for help.

The point of telling you this story, today, is this: we're talking about brokenness, in all its unpleasant manifestations. Someone once said to me that UUs feel that they cannot be broken – we are supposed to have it all together. We can't have problems, because we are supposed to help others with their problems. I can't be hurt, because it is my job to take care of others, said the medic in me!

By way of another example, a colleague of mine once noted that the Pastoral Care team at her church – a program that is meant to help church members with emotional and spiritual issues – thinks of itself as helping *others*, never helping each other, never helping themselves. When we were talking about that, we realized that many people will not utilize Pastoral Care services in UU churches, because we have this culture of being *the problem-fixers*.

When families in our churches cope with intense family drama, they stay away from church until the problems are all cleaned up. No one needs to know that someone's teenage son has a drug problem. No one needs to know that this or that couple is going through a divorce. To give this concept a name, it is *self-reliance*.

There are times when we need people to help us – times when we are *broken and need to be made whole*, again. (So says Lao Tzu in the Tao te Ching.) Self-reliance can be taken too far towards an extreme; likewise, seeking the help of others can also be taken to the *other* extreme – codependency – which is just as unhealthy. So, let us bring ourselves back to the middle.

This is where I stand: I cannot fix another person, but I *can* lead them to a place where it is *safe* for them to do the work of fixing themselves. I may be supportive of them while they do so, but I *cannot* do the work for them. I can be *caring*, without *caretaking*...

Brokenness is a state of being that any of us may find ourselves in, at some point in our lives. Cultivating

caring relationships with our family and friends – at church and elsewhere – is key to our living with happiness. It does not do to be so self-reliant that we do not keep the ones we love. Nor does it do to be so codependent that we exhaust the ones we love. But caring for them, and letting them care for us, is the balance that may bring happiness. Also written in the Tao te Ching, *wise souls travel the Middle Way, bringing balance to their lives*.

May we each be strong enough to handle the issues of life that confront us, and may we be wise enough to seek help when we need it.

May it ever be so, and blessed be you all!

BENEDICTION (by Rev. Michael Walker)

*On some days, we are like those terracotta soldiers in
China.*

Some broken, some not; but all are silent, all are still.

*We need the love of those around us, to break the mold,
to walk free and upright in our world.*

*Some days, we may feel like broken people, but with the
support of others, we may mend ourselves.*

*Let us take this spirit of caring out into our lives, our
work, and to our families and friends.*

*And when we need care, let us not stand so self-reliant as
a terracotta statue, but be open to the spirit of love
that is offered to us.*

May it ever be so and blessed be you all!