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Arlington Street Church  
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## Friend

Water, shelter, food ... and a friend. A friend can save your life.

Dan Kane was cooking, I was washing, and what happened next was definitely my fault, although he says “we” broke it. Drying on the counter was a hand-painted platter that Dan and Darin had brought home from Italy, a large, expensive piece of pottery with significant sentimental value. And “we” – that is, I – somehow unsettled it, and it dropped like a little bomb onto their kitchen floor, shattering into shards and dust with a c-r-a-s-h. I couldn't believe it.

Dan and Darin tried to reassure me, saying not to worry, but I was reeling; I felt horrible. Without missing a beat, my wife, my hero, opened her computer, Googled the artist, found their shop online, ordered a duplicate replacement, and announced that this one would have different sentimental value. All better.

Fast forward six months. A package arrives from Dan and Darin. What is

it? No, not an Italian platter ... well, not exactly. It's a reincarnation. Here, I've brought it to show you: it's a mirror, set into a mosaic of the broken pottery. It's one of a set; they sent this one to us, and kept one for themselves.

Dan wrote, quoting Terry Tempest Williams' latest book, *Mosaic: Finding Beauty in a Broken World*, "A mosaic is a conversation between what is broken. I believe in the beauty of all things broken."<sup>1</sup>

Friend: the one who sees the beauty, even in the brokenness, and reflects that to us, like a mirror.

My very favorite words in the Bible were spoken between friends: Ruth to Naomi, daughter-in-law to mother-in-law:

Intreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee:  
for whither thou goest, I will go;  
and where thou lodgest, I will lodge:  
thy people shall be my people,  
and thy god my god:  
Where thou diest, will I die, and there will I be buried:  
the lord do so to me,  
and more also,  
if ought but death part thee and me.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Terry Tempest Williams, *Mosaic: Finding Beauty in a Broken World*, p. 14

<sup>2</sup> Ruth 1:16-17

Kem and I also spoke these words at our wedding, and have spoken them to each other countless times, since. Friend: devotion.

There are other beautiful words about friendship in the Bible. My friend and colleague, Rev. Susan Moran, recently told me that scholars now agree that the first two chapters of the Book of Job were originally a stand-alone story; the next chapters were a later addition, by a different author. I'm ecstatic, because I can't stand Job's friends; they start out like true mensches, then quickly devolve into the category of "with friends like that, who needs enemies?" So who are they in those first two chapters – maybe, who are they, really?

I don't want to spend too much time with the details, but, in three sentences: Job is the wealthiest man in the land with a loving wife, seven sons, and three daughters thrown in for good measure. Then somebody's twisted idea of G\*d makes a deal with the devil and decides to test Job. It all goes to hell, everyone and everything dies, and Job loses everything, including his health ... except his friends. I won't spoil the ending.

But I really, really hope Susan Moran is right: if this is the end of the story, this passage about Job's friends is so beautiful:

When Job's three friends heard about all these calamities that had befallen him,

each came from his own house –

Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite, and Zophar the Naamathite.

They met together to go and mourn with him and comfort him.

When they saw him from a distance, they could not recognize him, and they broke into loud weeping.

Each one tore his own robe and threw dust into his hair.

And they sat down with him on the ground for seven days and seven nights.

No one spoke a word to him, for they saw how very great was his suffering.<sup>3</sup>

Friend: the one who comes and sits and remains with us, even in the face of terrible brokenness, and helps us to bear it.

Gordie is a senior at Concord Academy. He gets around in a wheelchair, although it's easy to forget, given that he swims, sails, and is the varsity lacrosse goalie. It's easy to forget Gordie doesn't have the use of his legs, until there's a fire drill.

At least, that's what I pray. I can't even imagine trying to navigate in a chair under the best of circumstances, let alone in an emergency, a flight of stairs up with the elevator out. I pray, before we run to save ourselves, we remember he can't get down unaided.

And then one day recently, as we sat at lunch in the crowded, noisy dining

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<sup>3</sup> Job 2: 11-13 (translation based on that of Stephen Levine). Thank you, Rev. Susan Moran!

hall, the fire alarm went off. For all I knew, this was the real thing. Instinctively, I looked up at the balcony, where there's comfortable seating and a little less chaos. And there was Gordie. My heart. The siren was deafening. Fear rushed in my ears, and my mouth went dry.

But at the same moment I saw him, half a dozen guys dove toward him, and into action: two guys in front, bracing; two on either side, lifting; two in back, lifting and leaning back against gravity ... and Gordie, being borne forth like a king, with a huge grin on his face. You have never seen a wheelchair come down a flight of stairs so fast. Safely down, they pushed him at breakneck speed out of the building ... so fast, I could have imagined it all. Wiping away my tears, I followed them out.

“Guys, that was amazing!” Gordie laughed as they all, in their inimitable, inscrutable teenage boy way, pounded on each other and made loud grunting noises. I knew I could take “Gordie in a fire drill” off my list of things to worry about in the night. Gordie has friends.

Friends: the ones who makes the world a little safer, the ones who carry us when we can't, the ones who make us smile.

An old Hassidic rabbi was asked by his students how they could tell that the night had ended and the day had begun, for that is the time for certain holy prayers. “Is it,” they asked, “when you can see an animal in the distance and tell whether it is a sheep or a goat?” “No,” answered the rabbi. “Is it when you can

clearly see the lines on your palm?” “Is it when you can see the leaves at the top of a tree?” “No,” answered the rabbi each time. “Then when is it?” his students demanded. “It is when you can look on the face of any person and see that they are your sister or brother or cousin. Until then, it is still night.”<sup>4</sup>

Friend: to look on all people as all our relations. This looking and seeing is the spiritual practice of friendship: to recognize the inherent worth and dignity of every being – the first principle of Unitarian Universalism – to seek and find the spark of the sacred, and to breathe on that spark with our compassion and care. Vipassana meditation teacher Jack Kornfield writes, “Spirituality is not about ... mountaintops. It is seeing the sacred, right here.... Even our enemies show us how to awaken, if we recognize the truth.”<sup>5</sup>

My last story of friendship for this Valentine's Day is from psychiatrist Stanislav Grof. Dr. Grof was working in the field of consciousness research at Johns Hopkins Medical School when a Native American colleague invited him and several other docs to his peyote circle in the plains of Kansas.

Although the Road Chief, the elder who leads the rituals in the Patawatame church, had agreed to include the Anglo visitors, the other Indians balked; this felt like an invitation to spiritual genocide. After extensive negotiations, the white men were allowed to join in, although one Native held out, furious. Seated directly across from Stan Grof, he glared at the intruder

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4 adapted from Jack Kornfield, *After the Ecstasy, the Laundry*, p. 239

5 Kornfield, *op cit*, p. 242

through the night of drumming and peyote and prayer, hatred pouring across the circle.

During the final round of blessings, the host psychiatrist thanked his tribe for including the white healers, especially Dr. Grof, who had been exiled by the Communists from his native Czechoslovakia. Suddenly, all the anger drained from the face of the man opposite Stan. “He leapt to his feet, crossed the fire, and fell into his lap, sobbing, ...[apologizing] for his misguided hatred.”

His story came pouring out. In the final weeks of World War II, as the Nazis withdrew, he had flown a bomber. And even though Czechoslovakia had been anti-Nazi and forcibly occupied by Germany, his plane had bombed and destroyed Pilsen, one of Czechoslovakia's most beautiful cities. He had, in other words, participated in the destruction of Dr. Grof's motherland. The terrible tables of victim and perpetrator were turned.

He embraced Stan, begging for forgiveness. Addressing the Anglo doctors, he said, “I see now that there can be no hope for the world if we carry hatred for deeds committed by our ancestors. I know now you are not my enemies, but my brothers.... We are all children of the Great Spirit.... If we do not work together, we will die [alone].”<sup>6</sup>

My spiritual companions, a friend can save your life.

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<sup>6</sup> in Kornfield, *op cit*, pp. 245-246

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the one who make us smile.

Friend: to look on all people as all our relations:  
to forgive, to bear hope, and to work together for a world at peace,  
a world in love.

Happy Valentine's Day, my friends!