Healing Body and Soul
A Sermon by Reverend Lynn Strauss

The poet Mark Nepo reminds us to make of our lives a prayer...to stretch through the great pain of our lives in order to learn what it means to be alive. Nepo tells us all of our life can have the quality of prayer...a sacredness.

“All that pain has taught me...is to unfold again as if never before...and be the prayer.”

Make of your life a prayer. That is my message this morning.

We all have wounds - old wounds and new wounds. We all have sorrow.

As we struggle with the pain of both body and soul, we find ourselves coming here to church, to this congregation, to this hour of celebration of the joys and sorrows of life.

As we struggle to heal body and soul, we engage in the spiritual practice of Sabbath. We come to a holy place. We pause. We listen and reflect. We let the music and the words wash over us. We, in our unique Unitarian Universalist way, make of our lives a prayer.

What do we know of healing?
There’s a beautiful book titled *My Bright Abyss: Meditation of a Modern Believer* by Christian Wiman, a writer and poet. Mr. Wiman wrote during the years he struggled to survive cancer.

He questioned whether there was meaning in his illness. He questioned whether there was anything he could put his trust in. Facing death, he questioned the idea of God.

Wiman writes:

“Not long after I first learned that I was sick, in the dim time travel, multiple doctors, and endless tests, when it seemed that I might be in danger of dying very soon, I began to meet every Friday afternoon with the pastor at the church just around the corner from where my wife and I lived.

I think he, like anyone whose faith is healthy, actively craved instances in which that faith might be tested. So we argued for an hour every Friday, though that verb is completely wrong for the complex, respectful, difficult interactions we had.

Nothing was ever settled. And yet those hours and the time afterward, when, strangely enough, I didn’t so much think about all that we had discussed as feel myself freed from such thoughts..are among the happiest hours of my life.

Grief was not suspended or banished, but entered and answered. Answered not by theology, and not by my own attempts to imaginatively circumvent theology, but by the
depth and integrity and essential innocence of the communion occurring between two people.”

Communion...

I remember taking communion as a child, perhaps you do as well. Too young to argue theological questions, I received the blessing of communion as an acknowledgement of my inherent worth. I remember the feeling of my minister’s hand upon my young head.

Rituals of prayer and meditation, of pausing to enter sacred silence...have been proven to be as significant to healing as medication, surgery, and other medical treatments.

From the beginnings of human history, the search for healing both body and spirit has brought people into religious ritual...into pilgrimage to holy sites, into use of oils and herbs, into chanting and prayer, into circumnavigation and walking the labyrinth.

There are many Biblical stories that link physical and spiritual healing. When the woman touched the garment of Jesus and was healed. When Jesus touched the eyes of the blind man and he could see again.

Human touch is essential to healing both body and soul. Healing touch is essential.
I read this morning of the Ebola crisis and how 15 nurses have died in the isolation wards in Sierra Leone. And yet the nurses stay, for to abandon sick and dying patients, to deny them nursing care, to deny them healing human touch is unthinkable to the nurses who remain on duty.

To anoint the sick is a form of communion.

When we, ourselves, or a loved one are sick and suffering – we of the Western, post-modern world - do not, as a rule, turn first to religious or spiritual ritual. We first look for answers. We Google, we call for a conference with the doctor or the medical team, we seek out the latest therapy.

And we try to answer the existential questions that begin with “Why?”

We try to figure out how to bring order to the chaos of illness and to make peace with “not knowing” or not being in control.

One of our dear members, Carole Danielson, has been healing from a very badly broken leg and from other complications that came on during her hospitalization. I asked Carole to write something about her experience in healing body and soul.

She wrote:

“Life is a trickster. You are going along your merry way like any other day, making plans with friends, planting geraniums,
thinking about what to have for lunch. Then life throws you an unexpected curve - a fall, a stroke, a heart attack, a cancer diagnosis - and suddenly your world is turned upside down.

Where there once was order, now is chaos. Where once there was independence, now you must be dependent. That is how I felt when I fell, shattering my left leg, followed two weeks later by a near-death experience with pneumonia. I have now been in long-term care for four months and expect to be here another month or so.

What has sustained me during this long recovery? How have I managed to stay grounded and avoid feelings of depression, loneliness, boredom, or being overwhelmed? I haven’t avoided those feelings altogether, but I have managed to avoid letting those feelings rule my emotional state.

About the bout of pneumonia, I awoke one morning in the nursing home and turned my head to look out my window, catching a beautiful sunrise. And I thought, “I’m Alive!” The pneumonia came close to taking me, but I survived and I am alive.

So there must be something more that I need to contribute in this life. Those feels of gratitude and purpose have sustained me over these many months.”

“I am Alive. There must be something more that I need to contribute in this life.”
That is the core of what it means to live your life as a prayer. That is the core of meaning, if there is any to be found, in illness and pain.

Something calls us to Life. Something calls us to move toward healing...healing in body and soul.

We come to moments of crisis, moments of pain and we are called forward. We find the meaning...there is something more I need to contribute in this life.

I’ve had trouble getting behind the popular “bucket list” idea. I believe what most people yearn for is meaning, not satisfaction. What we really long for is affirmation of our worth and dignity, not one more satisfying adventure. What we really long for is the chance to make one more contribution in this life.

Healing happens through communion - a profound connection with life - and for most of us that connection comes in relationship.

Rituals are ways to honor sacred relationships.

One of our members described to me a ritual that came from her heart. Her father, who died last year, was a spiritual person and he had collected mirrors of different sizes and shapes. It wasn’t clear what he meant to do with the mirrors.
But his daughter was inspired to hang the mirrors in her garden, and seeing them there as they reflected the light of the sun, she felt her father’s spirit was with her. “Hey, Dad,” she found herself saying as she worked in the garden. “Hey, Dad”...it was comforting and healing to have found this ritual of remembrance.

Our free faith grants us the freedom to craft meaningful rituals of healing connection.

Our free faith encourages us to understand our life purpose to be directed, not to life after death, but to find what it is we are to contribute in this life. Acts of kindness and compassion are paths toward healing our souls.

Let us not make an idol of our own journey. Let us not stay within our own individual experiences of pain and healing.

Christian Wiman writes:

“The temptation is to assume our pain is more singular than it is. In truth, experience means nothing if it does not move beyond itself...have meaning, project meaning beyond ourselves.

We are, each of us, every single one of us, meant to be a lens for truths that we ourselves cannot see. Kierkegaard once said, ‘The system cannot include the systemizer.’
To live in faith is to live toward a truth that we can but dimly sense, if at all, and to die in faith is to leave an afterimage whose dimensions and meanings we could never even have guessed at. Something of us is saved and made available for others.”

Wiman’s point and mine is that through the process of entering our pain and finding communion in relationship as we heal, our wounds become ways to teach one another.

As Carole can now teach us...as the daughter who hung the mirrors in the garden can now teach us...

We are not for ourselves alone. Our healing is a path toward love.

Thus we gather on Sunday morning, acknowledging our wounds and our pain, blessing one another with silence and song. Together following healing paths and learning from one another.

Pain is part of living. Here we pause to share the healing of body and soul.

So May It Be/Amen