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“The Mystery and Power of Relationship”

Rev. Julie Kain

I am assuming that a good number of you here today have seen the most recent Academy Award-winning movie, *Crash*, at least once if not more than that. The movie is provocative in more than one way and because of that it is not easy to watch at times, but it does have an amazing interwoven storyline. The movie takes place over the course of about twenty-four hours in current day Los Angeles, you know, just up the road from here. I'm not going to give away very much from the movie but I do want to point out a couple of things about its story that will help me begin today talking about the power and mystery of relationship. The movie is an intricately interwoven story with many characters who go through a series of chance encounters with each other. All of the central characters are shown interacting both in the context of familiar relationships, coworkers, best friends, husbands and wives, parents and children, and the movie shows lots of scenes where these same characters are interacting outside their familiar relationships in various encounters with strangers. The story shows in stark tones how our best and worst sides can be revealed in different ways as we interact with others. We are capable of such callous and close-minded behavior at times, patterns we've picked up from society, maybe our families. We learn to categorize people and we don't even notice when in subtle yet undeniable ways the category we've put people in becomes more important to us than the actual person. It's safe to say that some of the very worst examples of human behavior occur when this happens, when we are not able to see people for who they really are, complex human beings with their own struggles and their own wonderful qualities as well. And, it is safe to say that as human beings who share so many common experiences, longing, reaching out and sometimes finding deep connection with others, that we are also capable of beautiful acts of risk-taking, courage, and even down-right selfless compassion towards others, you know, under the right circumstances now and then.

I would be remiss if I didn't mention that the movie *Crash* deeply explores the human dynamics involved when we allow some kind of racial category to dominate our perceptions of another person. The frequency of examples of this nature in the movie may or may not be exaggerated, but I do believe that the depth and degree of our racial misperceptions is not exaggerated with the overall story. This is an unfortunate truth that we must come to terms with. If you stop to really think about it there is an incredible amount of power and mystery in the constant phenomenon of our being in relationship with one another. Our words and actions create a tremendous impact on the lives of those surrounding us and beyond. Our words and actions can cause real harm and pain or they can offer hope and healing. Relationships form a kind of web that holds the movement of our entire lives together. Our closest relationships serve as the crucial strands of reference that we have within the web: a special child, a parent, a grandparent, a teacher, a coworker, or friend.

Haven't you ever noticed how there is often something truly mysterious about what draws people together in relationship? Sometimes we experience a profound

connection as though a bond between ourselves and another was not created by our intentions or efforts but has some kind of element of grace about it; a gift beyond our own making. Relationships like these are often a kind of sacred adventure and very much worth exploring.

Author John Welwood has written, for many of us today intimate relationships have become the new wilderness that brings us face to face with our gods and demons. When we approach it this way, intimacy can become an unfolding process of human growth, even a spiritual path. Relationships offer us constant opportunities for practicing what we say we believe in, honoring what is most important to us in practice not just in word. We practice listening. We practice being present. We practice being seen and being heard. We practice being enthusiastic for another, grateful, patient, caring. When we are lucky we actually practice playing together sometimes too. We ask questions and learn from each other. We negotiate and sometimes we even redefine ourselves in the context of a relationship.

At the very same time relationships offer constant opportunities for another kind of spiritual practice. Have you ever noticed how particularly some relationships have a way of finding just the right buttons to push, a way of revealing our growing edges. I mean, we all have our issues. Magically, relationships have a way of bringing them to our attention on a regular basis. We all have our vulnerabilities and limitations, but you know that it is at those very places within and between us that there is the greatest potential for growth, for learning, for healing. When relationships expose our growing edges and our shadow sides, they can serve to draw out our insecurities, our anger, even our envy. The many ways that we have dealt with being wounded in our life are revealed.

Emerson wrote, “We are not very much to blame for our bad marriages. In the worst assorted connections there is ever some mixture of true marriage.” Let’s think about that for a moment. Let’s think about how relationships in our lives give us so much practice at being more of who we really are. With our own issues isn’t it difficult to have it come face to face with us as we interact with those closest in our lives. We don’t like it when it happens, but it shows us more of who we really are. Growing edges put in another way is an opportunity for new growth, an opportunity to stretch ourselves in a new direction or heal some part of that old wound within us. One of the greatest powers and mysteries in relationship is how intimacy can offer us a tremendous opportunity for transformation in our lives. I’m using the word intimacy here to reflect a deep and honest sharing that is genuine with all concerned. Intimacy in its variety of forms always presents us with something new. It always presents us with something precious in the ways it reveals our deep connections with other people. It even offers possibilities for experiencing a redeeming kind of love in our lives. As the song in our UU hymnal says, “Our spirits long to be whole” and sometimes other people can help us to experience our own wholeness.

An author, Russell Hoban, said this, “When people fall in love they entrust to each other the idea of themselves.” I mean the essential idea of them, that perhaps they don’t even

know themselves. Each holds out to the other this obscure and unknown thing for the other to perceive and keep safe. Growing edges is a way of saying we have opportunity to stretch beyond the smaller ways that we think of ourselves. When we have this precious opportunity to experience true intimacy, it helps to create the conditions in which we grow into the fullness of our being. This other person can sometimes hold a picture of us as a beautifully whole person with all of our gifts and weaknesses better than we are able to hold it for ourselves. We really do need each other in order to find ourselves. The poet Carolyn Kaiser puts it this way, "I believe in you. I believe that everyday you are getting better and better and if the world is saved it will be saved by the likes of you. Now I am able to be still and know that God is in us, because so clearly I can see God is in you."

I believe that the power and mystery of relationship to transform our lives is a kind of divine intervention. Some of the chance encounters in the movie *Crash* could be seen that way, too. The very first time I attended a Unitarian Universalist Sunday worship service it was an All Souls Celebration, honoring all those who had died and been born in the past year. Just weeks before I had experienced my first death of someone close to me. It was Donald, my surrogate grandfather, my childhood friend who used to take me on walks down to the duck pond when I was a little girl. I talked about Donald in my sermon for All Souls this year, some of you may recall. At the time I had been looking for a church to take my daughter, but it actually was a time when I was ready for the power and mystery of relationship in a community of faith. Yes, Donald was like a grandfather to me, but the power and mystery our relationship was deeper even than that. Not only did I not know any of my biological grandparents, I grew up not knowing my father as well. And so Donald played an incredibly important role in my life that went much further beyond the treasured walks to the duck pond. Those few weeks before I first walked through some UU doors on a Sunday morning, it was my mother who had given the eulogy at Donald's open-casket memorial. She talked about Donald and his life, how he'd lived on an Indiana farm in a house he helped his father build, how the only time he left Indiana was to serve in the First World War. She talked about how he'd been married once when he was young but after the divorce he remained a bachelor for many years until he developed a deep and long-lasting friendship with Sadie, the woman who took care of me as a small girl. My mother then talked about the special relationship between Donald and me from nearly the moment I was born. She talked about how even though Donald had retired from his long career in an Indiana auto plant, the time he spent with me was really important to him, too. He had no children of his own and his love and devotion to me was a special gift in his life, not just in ours.

We should never underestimate the power and mystery at work in the intimate relationships in our lives whenever we come into genuine communion with another. It is a power to heal and transform each of us into more of what we are meant to be, into what we are longing to be: whole and loved.

Amen and Blessed Be.