IN CELEBRATION OF CAREGIVERS
A sermon preached October 14, 2007
by Rev. Mary Moore

Now there was once a professional woman who was also the mom of three-year-old twins. One evening she cooked a very elegant dinner party for her colleagues, including her boss. Her menu featured a very fine porter house steak. Then she sat at the head of the table and seated her boss at her right in the position reserved for the guest of honor. Imagine her horror when she looked down after the meal had begun and discovered that she had automatically reached for her boss' plate and started cutting the steak up into little half-inch cubes.

This morning I'm going to be talking about care-giving, inappropriate care giving, supporting caregivers, and caregiving in our community and the larger world. Current estimates suggest that there are seven million caregivers in the United States -- that is, individuals who have some responsibility for the health, maintenance and care of an elder or a chronically ill loved one. Most of today's seniors with health problems are not in nursing homes. In fact, 70 to 80 per cent of them are cared for by their family members. For caregivers this can mean a commitment of ten and sometimes twenty years.

Today most people who reach the age of fifty still have at least one living parent. Because of this greater longevity, many adults can expect to care for a parent as long or longer than they care for their own children. Eighteen years versus seventeen years, if you want the statistics. Consequently, for the first time, the average married couple has more parents than children. "Caregiving," social worker Joan Budie writes, "is 'the other midlife crisis.' It forces you to look at your life and at yourself." Sometimes families who have a lot of problems are forced to do some introspection when trying to work together with their parents. It can be an opportunity to change and to come to some closure. It can also be a real wake-up call.

Daniel Paris, who is a geriatric social worker at Mass. General Hospital in Boston, celebrated caregivers with the following words: "Caregivers are ordinary people caught up in extraordinary events."

This morning, I urge each and every one of us, whether we are currently actively caregiving in our lives, or temporarily not doing so, to look at caregiving as a spiritual practice. One way in which we might get in touch with this is a poem written by Stephen Ross called "The Caregiver's Creed."

At the close of day when I'm at my wits end,
I will seek renewal to start over again.
Each day I'll face care as a challenge that's new
And remember I've done the best I can do.
When I ask myself <u>why</u> or how long this will last,
I'll remember the love that's been shared in the past.
I know I'll have days that are lonely and sad.
It is then I'll remember good times that we've had.
I won't be a martyr or do it alone.
When I need someone's help, I'll pick up the phone.
Opinions I'll get, and sometimes a fight,

But I will not feel guilty if I think I am right.
I know how things are, for I'm there today.

So I won't be upset when they question what I say.
I won't lose myself in everyday tasks,
Or hide how I feel with a caregiver's mask.
A mask that protects the fear and anger inside me,
That if vented and worked through, would be tools that could guide me.
It may seem what I do is never enough,
So I won't set a standard that's so very tough.
A little each day may be all to be gained.
I'll accept any progress and not feel it's in vain.
A step taken forward, a word that is spoken,
To recall from a memory that for years has been broken,
Are all little victories in a caregiver's day.

Many Unitarian Universalists often talk about having salvation by bibliography. And this morning I am no different. There are wonderful books, excellent books, the one which I read our meditation from, books such as *The Caregiver's Mission, Caregiving, Parenting Your Aging Parents, Why Is It So Hard to Take Care of My Parent?* I recommend them to each and every one of you.

When we are caregiving, what is truly merciful changes from day to day – even from hour to hour – often we have to go to extremes of doing too much or too little for someone before we can find the right extent of caring. It's best to allow our loved ones sometimes to do as much as possible for themselves. They need as much as possible to maintain a sense of independence.

I want to speak this morning as we celebrate caregivers - and there are many in this congregation - of the support system for caregivers. Yes, it includes family and friends as well as medical and legal and social service professionals. It should be available not only for emergencies, but you also should know about it in advance for the relief of the ongoing daily stress.

Beth McCloud reminds us this morning that when help is needed, as a caregiver, don't do it all alone. Receptivity to support means accepting help from children and friends and in-laws and brothers and sisters and neighbors who can take over when you need time for yourself. Interested friends and relatives may feel that if you decline their offers of help or companionship, then they are shut out.

The author, Eileen Grant, speaks to us about caregivers who resist external help. And she urges them to ask themselves these questions: What do you believe about responsibility? What about your own needs versus the needs of others? When will it be time to consider your own priorities? What stops you from thinking about your own needs? Guilt or fear or need for approval? A positive consequence is that the loved one's needs will likely be met. The negative is you're going to end up exhausted.

In primitive societies, non-literate societies, there were nurturing rituals and social supports that helped to restore harmony to both the individual and the group. In modern times, despite cultural differences, we increasingly turn our grief and anxiety to groups. Groups, not out of tradition, but out of immediacy.

This morning I suggest to you, and I share with you, that our congregation might turn its attention to supporting the caregivers among us, to helping to form a group of caregivers. For there is no one who understands at a deep level more, than another person, a group of people

who are walking that same way together. As human beings we are sustained by the mutuality of contact and support which is part of our relationship with others.

Rabbi Harold Kushner, author of *When Bad Things Happen to Good People,* as most of you know, talks about the story of Job in the Prime Testament. And he talks about the friends of Job. They give advice and they try to respond to Job's question, "Why is God doing this to me?" But theological explanations are not what Job is seeking. Job needed sympathy more than advice. He needed compassion and the sense that others felt his pain with him. He needed physical company and people sharing their strength with him. It sounds like he needed a support group.

During our meditation I talked to us about flow and about breathing in and out. Whether you have been or currently are a caregiver or are not yet one at this moment, may we take this time to take three deep breaths together as a congregation, breathing in all that good oxygen and having a cleansing breath out. And you know, it's OK if you sigh, or if you say, "Ahhh!" when you are breathing out. May we breathe in together. And breathe out. Ahhh. May we breathe in. And breathe out. May we breathe in – and may we breathe out.

Sometimes caregiving in this congregation appears to me, a relative outsider, to be anxious. Sometimes caregiving in this congregation appears to me, as an outsider, to be slightly aggressive caring. We're afraid we might miss someone who has some problem. We're afraid we might miss someone who needs our nurture. I share with you the news this morning that no one in a congregation this size can know all that is happening in people's lives. This is one reason for SGM – for those of you who have been wondering what those initials were ever since the announcements: Small Group Ministry. That's why it is important -- so there will be a group of people who know you face to face and know what is happening in your life and in the lives of those close to you.

Yet I have seen some caregiving here to be, as I say, aggressive caregiving. I've seen gossipy caregiving. I've seen people who say, "Well, I'm in the know. I know what's happening in other people's lives in this congregation." That is not healthy caregiving. I've heard self--aggrandizement– that crossword puzzle word – on the part of some people, "I know what's going on in this congregation." I sense that sometimes people are working out some things from their families of origin, and, boy, we all have those things as we try to deal with caregiving. Some people may feel that they get gold stars when they deal with caregiving. And I think Stephen put it so well, "We UUs are not into giving gold stars." I think sometimes people feel they need to give or show their gratitude for ways in which the congregation has supported them in their pasts by over-functioning in their caregiving.

There are different kinds of people. We UUs celebrate diversity. And they need to be nurtured in different ways. There is no one right way for Unitarian Universalists, as Stephen would remind us. And so in this congregation which has so much caregiving going on in so many of your personal lives, I sometimes feel that this congregation can be somewhat out of balance; that it does not see the huge diversity of the human condition; that it doesn't see that there are those among you who do not have this caregiving burden in their lives -- or this caregiving opportunity and blessing.

To revisit the words of Sylvio Nardoni from last week's sermon, "Some congregations have mirrors for windows which reflect the concerns of those present. Other congregations have clear windows which open to the community outside." I hope this congregation will come to have a balance between caregivers and those who are ill and those who do not have these challenges in their lives right now. I hope this congregation will feel free to perhaps create a group that just has fun together, that goes to see a movie together, that goes skating -- that goes

roller skating, goes ice skating or whatever pleases you. Or bowling. And you know what? Some of the caregivers among you just might join in. I would encourage this congregation perhaps to have a retreat. And not a Board retreat, or not a retreat of the leaders, but a retreat of the whole congregation out in the woods, maybe in a state park, or a church camp. A retreat for all ages. For friends and members of this congregation. A respite time for getting away together. And even if a person is not able to go on a retreat, or not able to go bowling, or roller skating or going to see a film, I think it is good for them to know that such activities are going on.

Religions in general urge us to have a balance in our lives. I always like the idea that at an Islamic wedding, they give a gift to the poor. I like the idea that one of the five pillars of Islam is supporting the poor. People think of Buddhism as being known for meditation and contemplation.

Jesus of Nazareth was known for healing. But he is also constantly getting on the case of the Pharisees and the Sadducees. And he is also known for overturning the tables of the moneychangers in the Temple.

I repeat to you the words of William Isom I shared with you last week, "Churches, like people, are healthiest when they reach out to others rather than worrying about themselves." Churches grow because they intentionally reach out. Churches die because they dwell on their own internal problems.

Within the Jewish tradition, there is the word *tikkun* which means taking care of our world. Caretaking our world, turning the world around. Unitarian Universalists down through the ages have been known for doing social justice and taking care of our world.

I like the practice of All Souls Unitarian Universalist Church in New York City. At this time of stewardship pledging here, we might hearken to their example; for they ask each and every one of their members to pledge five hours a month to social justice – hands-on projects within their congregation. And we have such opportunities available here, too. Whether it's the Interfaith Hospitality Network which helps the homeless, whether it's Habitat for Humanity.

I want to close by saying the points of my remarks this morning. I would like to see this be a congregation who nurtures those who need caring among us. I would like to see this congregation be a congregation that nurtures the many caregivers here perhaps by creating a support group for caregivers. I would like to see this congregation be one in which we open ourselves more to nurturing our community and the world. And I would like to see this congregation create some opportunities for caregivers and those who are cared for and for everyone -- opportunities for people just to enjoy themselves sometimes, to replenish themselves with a retreat or some fun activities. For this is caregiving for ourselves, for others, for our community, and for our world.