

The Guest at Your Table
By Rev. Ann Schranz
Monte Vista Unitarian Universalist Congregation
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Clear a spot in your home for a “Guest at Your Table” box. This annual fundraising campaign benefits the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee (UUSC), which is an independent human rights organization that is not financially supported by the Unitarian Universalist Association. Clearing a spot in your home may mean moving newspapers or magazines, with their words and images of natural disasters, as well as disasters made (or made worse) by human beings. Bad news sells, after all. War, genocide, ethnic cleansing, earthquakes, floods, drought, and human cruelty in all of its forms . . . It is hard for many of us to stay emotionally and financially responsive in the face of so much human suffering. “Compassion fatigue” is a particular risk in our hyperconnected, media-saturated lives.

In the short run, the lethargy and numbness of compassion fatigue might be therapeutic – It can help us cope with feelings of being overwhelmed. However, in the long run, compassion fatigue robs others and robs our very selves of generosity of spirit. Regardless of our theological or philosophical position, how might we transform compassion fatigue into compassion zest? This is a critical question for our time. What kind of magic does it take?

Sit back, relax, and hear a story about a possum. It is a Kansas possum (if it were an Irish possum, it might be an opossum, but it’s not; this is the story of a Kansas possum). ;) This story is from the book *The Van Gogh Café* by Cynthia Rylant.¹ In the story, we receive hints about how to transform compassion fatigue into compassion zest.

“The Van Gogh Café sits on Main Street in Flowers, Kansas, and the building it is in was once a theater, which may be a reason for its magic . . . Sometimes the magic wakes itself up, and people and animals notice it. They notice it and are affected by it and pretty soon the word spreads that there is a café – the Van Gogh Café – that is wonderful, like a dream, like a mystery,

¹ *The Van Gogh Café* by Cynthia Rylant, published by Scholastic, Inc., New York, by arrangement with Harcourt Brace & Co., 1998.

like a painting, and you ought to go there, they will say, for you will never forget it. You will want to stay if you can. Some have for a while, like the possum.

Kansas is not what one would call picturesque. It is flat. So flat it could make some people a little crazy, people who need a hill now and then to keep their balance. But in Kansas at least things get noticed. The flatness makes everything count and not one thing slips by. That is why, if a possum was going to chose to hang upside down somewhere, Kansas would be a good choice. People would notice. And if the possum chose to hang outside the window of the Van Gogh Café in Flowers . . . well then, everyone would start talking about magic. And that would be good for the possum, too.

The Van Gogh Café is owned by a young man named Marc and his daughter, Clara. Clara is one reason for all of the magic in the café. She is ten and believes anything might happen. Marc and Clara open up the café at six every morning except Sundays, when they sleep until ten. Clara takes breakfast orders for Marc – who is the cook – for half an hour on school mornings, then she goes to their apartment across the street to get ready for school. Clara likes taking orders because everyone is sleepy and sweet and all they want I the world is a cup of coffee, please. Clara thinks morning is the kindest time of day.

Most of the people who come to the Van Gogh Café are Flowers people and know each other. “Hi Ray.” “Hello, Roy.” But sometimes someone is new, for Flowers sits near I-70, which people take when they are escaping from an old life in the East to a new life in the West or the other way around. Clara has met many people between six and six-thirty on their way to something new.

But she has not met a possum until today. Today is Saturday and she’s working a couple extra hours for her father, and it is eight o’clock in the morning when suddenly a possum is hanging upside down in the tree outside the café window. Right on Main Street. A minute ago it wasn’t there, and now it is.

Clara sees it first: *Look, there's a possum*. Coffee cups go down, heads turn, and outside a little gray possum enjoys being noticed. It scratches its nose and blinks its eyes and stares back at all the faces . . . The possum starts coming back to the Van Gogh Café every day. Eight in the morning, he's up in the tree. But that's a small story. The possum begins to attract people, and this is the bigger story because he attracts people who haven't been getting along. Best friends who had a fight the day before: today they're standing on the sidewalk next to the possum. The possum is hanging upside down and blinking, and the two friends are talking, and suddenly they've got their arms around each other and are coming into the café for some pie. A young husband and wife: the day before they're arguing about loud music, the next day the possum is watching them shake hands.

The story becomes even bigger when people start bringing food out of the Van Gogh Café, food for the possum. Half an English muffin here, two pieces of oven-fried potatoes there, a cup of milk. They can't help themselves; they want to give it some food. The possum isn't hungry. But a stray dog from the other end of town is, and he starts stopping by for breakfast. So does a thin cat and two baby kittens. And a shy small mouse. Several sparrows. Even a deer.

And this goes on for a while until the biggest story happens. A story that will enter quietly into the walls and become part of its magic. For a man whose wife has died drives through Flowers, Kansas, one morning on his way to something new. He is sad. He really isn't sure where he's going. But passing the Van Gogh Café, he sees the possum. He sees the possum and he sees all the hungry animals standing beneath it, eating the scraps of muffins and potatoes.

And the man sees something else there, too, something no one has seen until now. And because of what he sees, he turns his car around and drives back where he belongs, back to his farm, which he turns into a home for stray animals, animals who come to him and take away his loneliness.

Since that day the possum at the Van Gogh Café has disappeared. One minute it was there, the next minute it wasn't. But the customers still bring food out of the café every morning, leaving scraps beneath the tree in case anyone hungry happens by. There is always a new stray dog, a

new thin cat, sparrows. Clara is not surprised the possum has gone away. Things are always changing at the Van Gogh Café, and something new is sure to happen soon.”

Here ends the excerpt from *The Van Gogh Café* by Cynthia Rylant. Things are always changing. We help each other turn compassion fatigue into compassion zest. The transformation may be a matter of pacing. Binges of any kind tend not to be healthy. None of these are very healthy: eating binges, drinking binges, or compassion binges. Many, many dollars have been raised to benefit those affected by one particular disaster or another. I am grateful for this generosity, *and* at the same time, I am a bit skeptical about this generosity. I am skeptical about whether disaster-specific generosity can be sustained in the next, inevitable disaster. I am skeptical that disaster-specific generosity can adequately address the structural, systemic issues which too often play out in racist, classist, and ethnocentric terms. I suspect we underestimate how far a dollar goes in other parts of the world.

Why is it that we often seem to need disasters to spur us to contribute to those less fortunate? This reminds me of the fixation on celebrity that is so prevalent in this country. We have way too many magazines focused on celebrities. All too often, we expect to be entertained, no matter what. I fear that we respond emotionally and financially to disasters as if they were entertainment.

Liberal religion is about hospitality for the human spirit, to use the phrase of Rebecca Parker, president of Starr King School for the Ministry. One way to transform compassion fatigue into compassion zest is to practice slow and steady hospitality, not frantic and dramatic hospitality, by writing checks, learning, educating, and volunteering at a sustainable pace, month in and month out. Eating binges, drinking binges, and compassion binges say more about *our* needs than they say about the needs of others. I support the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee year in and year out rather than donating money in response to each disaster as it occurs because I believe that we need to prevent disasters, to the extent possible, not solely respond to them after the fact.

I am impressed by the UUSC's nuanced understanding of race, class, and gender. The Unitarian Universalist Service Committee understands that "while the rights of people affected by a disaster can be threatened by the crisis itself – be it war, ethnic cleansing, or a hurricane – the way humanitarian relief is carried out can also add to people's suffering. Work to defend rights in crisis must encompass both problems. Focusing on precisely how inequalities in society play out in disasters, the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee partners with local organizations that defend and support those people whose needs are most likely to be overlooked or excluded in a disaster . . .

Ironically the very relief structures set up to allay human suffering can unintentionally leave some groups further back. [For example], after the December 2004 Asian tsunami, community leaders in the coastal settlements of Tamil Nadu presented census data that did not include the community's *Dalits* (traditionally called 'untouchables'). Because many aid agencies did not initially understand the dynamics of caste and exclusion in these communities, this misrepresentation served to cut the Dalit community off from early relief supplies, food, and shelter. [As another example,] housing reconstruction programs are [often] directed at male heads of families, with the result that women, by virtue of their gender, simply get left out."² I appreciate that my financial support of the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee goes to an organization with an exceptionally well developed grasp of issues of race, class, and gender.

In conclusion, what hints does Cynthia Rylant telegraph to us about transforming compassion fatigue into compassion zest from her possum story? Loneliness, sadness, and aimlessness can be avenues *into* social justice work, and social justice work can be an avenue out of loneliness, sadness, and aimlessness. Peer pressure can be a force for good at least as often as it can be negative. Magic involves the unexpected. We have it within ourselves to be instruments of the unexpected. Our towns – Montclair, Ontario, LaVerne, Pomona, Claremont, San Dimas, Upland, and others – our towns are where people stop on their way from west to east or from east to west; that is, on their way to something new. We have to believe that something *is* possible before it *can be* possible. We have to believe that social justice *is* possible before it *can be*

² See www.uusc.org/ia/gayt/index.html.

possible. Let us take the “Guest at Your Table” box home empty, and let us bring it back full. May we transform compassion fatigue into compassion zest. May it be so!