

For All Souls: The Sacred Work of Grief

A sermon preached by the Rev. Lee Bluemel
At The North Parish of North Andover, Unitarian Universalist, North Andover, MA
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It is quite a cloud of witnesses that surrounds us this morning.
I wonder what they would say to us, if they could speak.

In my imagination, those who are former members
of the congregation might say,
*“Thank you for remembering us! It’s good to be here.
So good to be here! Oh, we loved this place.
We spent so many Sunday mornings sitting right where you are.
Are the pews any more comfortable? The sermons any shorter? No?
Ah well. Some things never change.*

*Anyway, it’s good to see all of your faces in the pews—
good to see so many of you.
It warms our hearts to hear you singing, to know you’re still fighting the good fight!
Wish we could get to know you all!*

*But our time is limited, so here’s a question:
Are you taking care of each other?
Are you really taking care of each other, and of your neighbors, too?
You know- the ones who could really use some sign of love?
‘Cause Lord knows, we all can use a little love.*

*We know that life is no cake walk.
We could tell you some stories—some doozies of our own.
We saw a lot of life, and a lot of loss.
Just remember— even with the loss, life is worth living. Take it from us. We know.”*

Truly, we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses.
I wonder what they would say.

Surely, they would understand that just seeing their faces might make some of us feel fond affection on this All Souls Day, some gratitude for having known them, some gladness about the lives they lived, a warmth from our memories... but also loss and grief. They might wish we didn't feel sad, but surely they would understand.

As Unitarian Universalists, surely they would understand that the companion to deep gratitude, gladness and love is sorrow. Surely they would understand that a religion or a society or personal expectations that deny this are problematic at best, and at worst damaging to our personhood, our souls, our trust in life, even our physical beings. In other words, we run into trouble when we don't give grief the respect it deserves.

The Unitarian Universalist minister the Rev. Mark Belletini has written, "*I am a child of grief as much as gratitude, joy and love.*" So he wrote this lovely little book called *Nothing Gold Can Stay: The Colors of Grief*, which can be ordered from the UUA Bookstore.

A UU parish minister for 37 years, Belletini uses his personal experiences to reflect on different aspects of grief—grief and sorrow, grief and weariness, grief and ritual, grief and theology. He explores grief and music, grief and dance, grief and animals, grief and relationships, grief and moving.

He looks at grief and depression, grief and memory, grief and life, grief and philosophy, grief and culture. Then there's grief and relief, grief and focus, grief and anger, grief and guilt, grief and astonishment, grief and gratitude. He has a lot to say.

As he notes, he learned about grief not through books but by the "school of hard knocks"—the loss of beloved grandparents, the loss of friends to car accidents or illness,

the loss of “the greatest portion” of his friends during the AIDS era in San Francisco.

Like most of us, grief also came to him in other ways than through the deaths of loved ones.

There was grief when he moved from his childhood home, grief at the end of friendships and romantic relationships, grief from other losses. He has great respect for the power of grief, which he learned early on in life. He shares this story:

“My cousin Linda had been diagnosed with leukemia when she was three. I didn’t know what that meant, of course, since she and I were about the same age. I’m not sure that she understood what that meant either, except for lots of trips to the doctor, and large white-tiled hospitals with glaring lights and too many needles.

I don’t remember either of my parents sitting down to talk to me about it, although I do remember they both sighed a lot when they spoke of her. I remember that their sighs prompted a kind of dread in me.

I was a kindergartner at Columbus School... One day, after school and play, I entered the side door (of my house) as usual, walked through the little kitchen of our bungalow, and into the living room. My mother was sitting on the couch, off to one side. She didn’t say hello, she just stared at me, silently. I didn’t say hello to her either. I stopped in my tracks. Then I spoke these words: ‘Linda died, didn’t she?’

My mother nodded almost imperceptibly, and suddenly, tears erupted from my eyes, and my whole body shook. Then I bolted to her and threw myself in her lap. She held me as I cried. Whether her eyes overflowed then I don’t remember. But I remembered for years my own tears and the trembling in my body. It was a bit scary to me that my whole body could just suddenly detonate like that, shuddering with feelings it could barely contain.

...the day Linda died... I learned that my body knows things,

sometimes as much as my head and heart.

I count that day as my first experience of grief.”

What was your first experience of grief?

Was there a moment you learned the wisdom of the body?

Or a time when you had no choice but to respect grief’s power?

What did you learn from it?

How did it change you? Or did it change you?

Maybe you’re ambivalent about this thing called grief—
and thinking you’d rather avoid it as much as possible.

Now, sometimes in New England, we can have a particular challenge with this.

This is captured in a comic strip by Hillary Price

that shows four people sitting in a church basement.

The title of the comic is *New Englander Support Group*.

One man says to another, “Glad you’re doing fine since you got your diagnosis.”

A woman chimes in, “It’s like when I was fine, when my parents got sick.”

Another guy says, “When my dog died, I was fine.”

Now, some of you may be thinking,

“That’s not what support groups are like at North Parish!”

Others of you may be thinking, yeah, that’s just about right.

It has to do with what I call “New Englander privacy settings”.

When New Englanders say they’re doing “fine”, sometimes there’s more to the story.

In addition to this insight, what I appreciate about the comic is the setting.

The characters are meeting where? In a church basement.

That’s a big hint about the nature of grieving.

Grieving is sacred work.

It’s messy, usually painful, unpredictable, often irrational.

But it is sacred work, which is what we do in congregations.

In his book, Rev. Belletini describes an experience that he had, not as a minister, but as a participant in a Jewish service after his best friend, Stephen, died. He and Stephen's partner, Richard, went to speak to Richard's rabbi. He writes,

The rabbi "reminded us that until the actual burial, we were people in a state of shock, and that we should be merciful to ourselves, because we might find ourselves speaking abruptly or withdrawing in ways different from our ordinary selves."

The rabbi also asked them to bring two sturdy friends as their support.

As Belletini says, "I didn't understand how literally he meant that. I asked my friend Tom to be there for me."

At the graveside, he writes, "The rabbi instructed our two chosen friends to come behind Richard and me as we stood at the edge of the hole and to place their hands on our backs. Then the rabbi asked the others to place *their* hands on the backs of our two friends, and the two of us were to *lean back* and be supported."

As the funeral began, the rabbi said a few words, people spoke and told stories, some wept. Belletini writes, "I was supported the entire time. Physically. Spiritually. Emotionally. At the end of the funeral, our friends put Richard and me more squarely on our feet." "The experience was remarkable, and underscored for me the *tangible power of community.*"

We may not have a ritual of literally holding each other up at graveside, but we hold each other up in other ways. We believe that those who mourn shall be comforted. *Those who mourn shall be comforted.*

It is part of the sacred work congregations do.

It's also the sort of thing is hard to sum up
when you're inviting someone new to join the church.
In fact, maybe membership in our congregation should come with a warning:
participating in religious community will not shield you from grief.
On the contrary, it will expose you to it-
your own grief, and that of others- and we will call this sacred.

You can take it at your own pace,
but know that here there will be space for your grief to breathe,
here you will witness the grief of others,
and here, there are some deep sorrows that we will share.
But in all this, having observed this congregation for 17 years,
I feel confident that we can make some promises to each other- promises like these:

We will defend your right to grieve.

To put it simply: your pain is valid.
We will believe that your loss is real.
And to grieve is as much a spiritual practice as cultivating gratitude, joy and love.

We will defend your right to grieve in your own way.

Your grief is yours- no one else has the exact same experience.
Some of us may grieve with copious tears, some may grieve with none.
Some may grieve privately, some may grieve in public.

Everyone does it differently.
And some relationships are quite complicated;
sometimes we have been wounded by those who've died. We will not judge.
We will defend your right to grieve in your own way.

We will defend your right to grieve in your own time.

It seems most people can tolerate another's loss for about a month
before wanting the bereaved person to get back to normal.
We know it takes longer than that, much longer than anyone wants it to.

We know that holidays, anniversaries and certain seasons
may be especially hard, even years after a loss.

We will defend your right to grieve in your own way, in your own time.

*Not only that, but we will affirm your right to grieve
at a distance from the community.*

If you need to take a break from people
because you're just too vulnerable or sad or angry or tired,
we will wait for you to rejoin us.

We hope you will choose one or two friends to count on for the long haul.
And meanwhile, we have a lot of patience.

We promise we will be here when you are ready to come back-
whether in a small group that knows you well, or to the sanctuary.

We will affirm your right to grieve in your own space.

If you wish, we will accompany you from a distance.

We can do that, through meditation and prayer and silent candles.

We can do that, through prayer shawls and cards, emails and food for the freezer.

And we know that when you rejoin community,
you might still need your own space in the pews.

It's OK to ask a friend to be your guardian.

It's OK to leave before the postlude. We will respect your space.

We will affirm your right to grieve as a physical being.

We recognize the physicality of grief,
the fatigue and exhaustion it can engender.

We know about "grief bursts"- those surges of grief that can come out of nowhere.

We know that sometimes words- all our words!- are no good,
but physical presence-- a hug, a visit, a quiet walk can help.

We will affirm your right to grieve with theological integrity.

If your grief requires you to leave behind certain beliefs, so be it. That's not uncommon.

If you want a loved one's memorial service to reflect their beliefs--

if you want certain popular music, or readings from the Bible,
or the word God never mentioned, that is what we will do.

There's no need to compound grief by theology you don't believe in.

We will also affirm your right to grieve without a theology of fear.

For hundreds of years, Universalists have pointed out
that ideas of hell and damnation are human constructions.

As Rev. Belletini says, "I have no final answers to offer about death,
although I admit I have never found any reason to regard eternal hellfire
as anything but the last socially permitted act of terrorism toward children."

Strong words.

We Unitarian Universalists affirm that though there is much to grieve,
there is nothing to *fear* after death.

This is so- whether our theology is one of reuniting with loved ones,
returning to God, or becoming one with the earth, our atoms part of the Universe.

Universalism reminds us we are all connected,
Unitarianism that we are part of a unified whole.

That old Universalist chant of "Death and glory!" still echoes
for those who see glory on the earth, or in the universe, or in reunion, or with God.

We will affirm your right to be happy again.

We know you deserve to be happy again.

And if you are, if you laugh and have fun,
we know it doesn't mean that you're all done grieving.

It turns out that many people live with a Great Ache--
a grief that will accompany them for their whole lives--
a great ache for someone who died, or for something or someone you never had,
or for a certain failure or accident for which we feel responsible.

Or it may be less personal- a Great Ache for the sufferings of your ancestors
or perhaps for the earth and all its beings.

Many humans learn to live with a Great Ache-

and they also learn that it's OK to also feel happy again.

Finally, will we affirm- over and over again- that life is worth living, despite grief.

We affirm that beauty and life can exist side by side with loss,
that abundant life is still possible.

We affirm that our relationships with those who've died do not end completely,
but are transformed as they become our inner companions.

And we know that one day, perhaps years from now,
you will be able to make a choice.

You will be able to choose, if you wish, to use the compassion or conviction
born of your grief to serve others, to have purpose,
to be one of Love's messengers in this hurting and oh-so-beautiful world.

We are all children of grief.

We are also children of gratitude, joy and love—
who belong to a great cloud of witnesses!

What a gift it is to count ourselves among them...

all those who went before us, those who are yet to be,
those who- in body, mind or spirit- continue to walk with us still.

Amen.