

Towson Unitarian Universalist Church
November 1, 2009
Rev. Clare L. Petersberger
Good Grief

WELCOME

Good morning and welcome to The Towson Unitarian Universalist Church on this morning following the end of Daylight Savings Time. Congratulations to all who remembered to set back their clocks after the festivities of Halloween!

Let us take a moment to greet fellow religious seekers around us. If, in this season of flu, you would feel more comfortable NOT shaking hands, you may choose to greet the highest in your neighbor from the highest within yourself, by putting your own hands together and saying, "Namaste."

For those of you who do not know me, my name is Clare Petersberger and I extend a special welcome to visitors. Do we have visitors to introduce or who would like to introduce themselves?

Welcome! We look forward to getting to know you and to having you get to know us. To this end, everyone is invited to remain for coffee and conversation following worship.

But first, we gather to worship on November 1st, the day after Halloween and Samhain, when the Catholic Church is marking All Saint's Day. This is the time of year we remember, in the words of Gregory Orr:

*Grief will come to you.
Grip and cling all you want,
It makes no difference.
Catastrophe? It's just waiting to happen.
Loss? You can be certain of it.
Flow and swirl of the world.
Carried along as if by a dark current.
All you can do is keep swimming;
All you can do is keep singing.*

PRELUDE

Silent Devotion and Response by Ernst Bloch

TUUC Choir

OPENING WORDS

Our opening words are by the late Unitarian minister, The Reverend Max Gaebler. He wrote:

In the feast of All Souls there is at the very center – a great democracy – which leaves none out. We call first to mind our own dead, those whom we have loved and lost but who still live in the twin immensities of our own hearts, our Love and our Memory.

We reach out to others, as well, to all whose names live within our memories, whose lives formed the world of our childhood and who have preceded us on life's last journey.

Finally, we welcome into our loving remembrance those countless men and women and little children who have walked the earth and breathed its air, who have enjoyed the gift of life and known its anxieties, all on every continent and in every time whose individuality has long since disappeared, gathered up in the vast treasury of human life upon this planet.

From this, our celebration of All Souls, let none be excluded, none forgotten.

As we reflect, in the days of the year's dying, on our own beloved dead, so will others remember us in days to come, until the last days of humankind upon the earth.

And even when memory ceases, the substance of our living will still remain, an ineradicable part of what has happened in this corner of the Milky Way.

CHALICE LIGHTING

In this spirit, you're invited to join in a responsive reading of words by Loren Eiseley printed in your order of service with which to light a flame of memory and of hope.

Since the first human eye saw a leaf in Devonian sandstone and a puzzled finger reached to touch it,

SADNESS HAS LAIN OVER THE HEART OF HUMANITY.

By this tenuous thread of living protoplasm, stretching backward into time,

WE ARE LINKED FOREVER TO LOST BEACHES
WHOSE SANDS HAVE LONG SINCE
HARDENED INTO STONE.

The stars caught our blind amphibian stare have shifted far or vanished in their courses,

BUT STILL THAT NAKED GLISTENING THREAD WINDS ONWARD.

No one knows the secret of its beginning or its end.

THE THREAD ALONE IS REAL; THE THREAD IS LIFE.

We light our chalice for the sacred power of memory and the enduring power of life and love.

MAY WE SEEK ALWAYS TO BRING LIGHT WHEREVER THE DEEP SHADOWS FALL.

READING

Mary Oliver traces the thread of life in her poem *In Blackwater Woods*.

Look, the trees are turning their own bodies into pillars of light,
are giving off the rich fragrance of cinnamon and fulfillment,
the long tapers of cattails are bursting and floating away over
the blue shoulders of the ponds, and every pond,
no matter what its name is, is nameless now.

Every year everything I have ever learned in my lifetime
leads back to this: the fires and the black river of loss
whose other side is salvation, whose meaning none of us will ever know.

To live in this world you must be able to do three things:
to love what is mortal;
to hold it against your bones knowing your own life depends on it;
and, when the time comes to let it go, to let it go.

HYMN

In honor of this season of letting go, let us join in singing hymn # 52, *In Sweet Fields Of Autumn*

READING

from *Ritual for The Day of the Dead/All Souls*

The long Summer has, indeed, faded, now. Last night, Daylight Savings Time ended.
Leaves are falling from trees, geese have been migrating south, and soon the frost will take our
tender plants. Last night, our children played with death and fear.

At this darkening time of the year, our thoughts turn to things past, to life retreating, to those who are
no longer with us. At this darkening time of the year, we affirm that death and distance are powerless
to sever the bonds that connect truly loving hearts.

RESPONSIVE MEDITATION

In affirmation of this, please join in a responsive reading of *We Remember Them* printed in your order
of service.

In the rising of the sun and in its going down, we remember them.

IN THE BLOWING OF THE WIND AND IN THE CHILL OF WINTER,
WE REMEMBER THEM.

In the opening of buds and in the rebirth of spring, we remember them.

IN THE BLUENESS OF THE SKY AND IN THE WARMTH OF SUMMER,
WE REMEMBER THEM.

In the rustling of leaves and in the beauty of autumn, we remember them.

IN THE BEGINNING OF THE YEAR AND WHEN IT ENDS,
WE REMEMBER THEM.

When we are weary and in need of strength, we remember them.

WHEN WE ARE LOST AND SICK AT HEART, WE REMEMBER THEM.

When we have joys we yearn to share, we remember them.

SO LONG AS WE LIVE, THEY TOO SHALL LIVE, FOR THEY ARE NOW A PART OF US,
AS WE REMEMBER THEM.

MUSICAL INTERLUDE

Ave verum corpus

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

TUUC Choir

May we hold on to a shining moment of memory, and carry it in our hearts as a candle,
to companion us in the dark.

If you would like to light a candle to honor the memory of a loved one or for a significant sorrow or joy,
you are invited to come forward to do so during the meditation in music.

READING

What is grief? The Reverend Stephanie Ericsson offers the following description:

*Grief is a tidal wave that overtakes you, smashes down upon you with unimaginable force,
sweeps you up into its darkness, where you tumble and crash against unidentifiable surfaces,
only to be thrown out on an unknown beach, bruised, reshaped.*

*Grief means not being able to read more than two sentences at a time. It is walking into rooms with
intention that suddenly vanishes.*

*Grief is waking up at three-o'clock-in-the-morning. It makes you look for a face in the crowd,
knowing full well the face we want cannot be found in that crowd.*

*Grief is utter aloneness that razes the rational mind. It makes you suddenly get up and leave in the
middle of a meeting, without saying a word.*

*Grief makes what others think of you moot. It shears away the masks of normal life and forces brutal
honesty out of your mouth before propriety can stop you.*

It shoves away friends, scares away so-called friends, and rewrites your address book for you.

Grief is ashes from which the phoenix rises, and the mettle of rebirth. It returns life to the living dead, It assures the living that we know nothing for certain.

It humbles. It shrouds. It enlightens.

*Grief will make a new person out of you, if it doesn't kill you in the making.
Sometimes it feels like we won't survive grief.
And then, we tap into reserves that we didn't know we had.*

The Reverend Kim Crawford Harvie reminds us of this in the following story.

I remember a woman whose husband died, leaving her to raise two young sons. Utterly devastated, she went to bed. As she tells it, she might never have gotten up.

But she did get up, and there was really no mystery about it. One of the boys came into her room and said, quite simply, "Mom, we're out of peanut butter."

I think of the role model she provided for her children. Reeling from the blow, she determined to stagger to her feet again, and life went on.

HYMN

To affirm that life does go on, even in the midst of what razes the rational mind, let us join in singing the English verse of *De Noche*, three times.

De Noche words, unknown author; music: Jacques Berthier

*By night, we hasten, in darkness to search for living water,
only our thirst leads us onward,
only our thirst leads us onward.*

READING

Martha Whitmore Hickman describes a different aspect of grief in her meditation *Everything Has Significance*. It begins:

Christopher Fry asks, "Shall we live in mystery and yet conduct ourselves as though everything were known?"

Hickman goes on to observe: When we are grieving, EVERYTHING has significance. We see meanings in what appear to be random events and wonder what is going on. A flower blooms in our garden out of season. The phone rings when we are feeling desolate and lonely, and it is a friend: "I was sitting here reading and I had a sudden urge to call you." A bird lands on a tree branch outside our window and bobs up and down, chirping and singing, for a very long time.

Are these just coincidences?

Is it possible that the mysteries of creation, the Powers, God, the energies that move the world – even our departed loved one – are looking out for us? We would like to think so.

And when we get together with others who have been through grief, we share our stories – shyly at first – and our skin tingles and our hearts are made glad and we think, "Yes, it might be so."

There is always room for doubt. There is also room for faith and hope. That is the nature of mystery. Let us accept as gifts, all intimations of love and care.

OFFERTORY

Adagio in B-flat

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

Joseph Gascho, pianist

Let us accept all intimations of love and care as our morning offering is given and received to sustain and deepen our common life. 15% of undedicated gifts will be returned to the community to feed the hungry, house the homeless, heal the addicted, and inspire a love of literacy.

SERMON

Good Grief

Yesterday, I officiated at the wedding of a couple in their mid twenties. The bride requested that in the words of welcome I address that many cultures teach that October 31st is a time when the veil between the living and the dead is lifted. Family ancestors are honored and invited home as part of preparing for the harvest, for life.

She asked that I speak the names of 13 relatives of hers and her fiancé who had died: including her mother and the step-mother who had raised her; and also grandparents, aunts, and uncles. I had officiated at many weddings where the memory of loved ones was invoked.

But the intentionality of this couple in choosing Halloween as the date of their wedding in order to remember 13 family deaths and honor how the love these individuals gave would live on in the love the couple brought to their marriage was unusual.

This couple's honesty with the reality of grief and loss, a hard part of life most of us do not want to face at any time much less on a wedding day, did not end there. This couple chose, as one of their readings, a poem by Pablo Neruda that begins:

*I do not dare,
I do not dare to write it,
If you die....*

and ends

*if you, beloved, my love,
if you have died,
all the leaves will fall in my breast,
it will rain on my soul night and day,*

*the snow will burn my heart,
I shall walk with frost and fire and death
and snow,*

*my feet will want to walk to where you
are sleeping, but
I shall stay alive,
because above all things
you wanted me indomitable,
and, my love, because you know that I am
not only a man
but all mankind.*

In twenty years of ministry, I had never officiated at a wedding where the couple brought to me a reading anticipating the death of a spouse. I assumed there must be a story behind their choice of this reading about anticipatory grief. And there was.

The bride concluded, “I know it’s unusual. But as we just shared, my fiancé and I have been through a lot, together, over the past ten years. And while we don’t know what the future will bring, one thing we do know we will want to nurture the indomitable spirit in each of us. For us, this reading is not just about death, but about the continuation of life.”

And so we celebrated the love of this couple in a wedding that reflected not only their experience of loss but their ringing affirmation of life. Their reception was a fun and playful masquerade ball!

The novelist, Anne Roiphe observes that “Grief is in two parts. The first is loss. The second is the remaking of life.”

This is true not only when we are confronted by the death of a loved one, but when we experience other losses:

a significant relationship, our health, a job, a dream,
freedom through addiction, or the illusion of security and safety.

So this morning I would like to explore “good grief.” What does it mean to grieve well?

This became a central question in my life after my husband, Tom, died. The first thing I learned is that the answer is not primarily an intellectual exercise – although that was my initial approach.

The first time I went to see a grief counselor through Hospice, I asked for a recommendation for a book. She suggested *The Year Of Magical Thinking* by Joan Didion. I completed that assignment by the time I saw her the next month. I asked for another book. She recommended the novel *The Year Of Pleasures* by Elizabeth Berg. Done.

The third month, I asked for another book. This time, she recommended *Epilogue* by Anne Roiphe. Done. The fourth month, when I asked for another book, the counselor met my request with a question:

“Have you moved Tom’s slippers?”

I had shared with her that when I went to put away Tom's slippers from the top of a bookcase in the bedroom where he'd left them six months earlier, I had noticed grass on the bottom of them.

Something about that grass... that he had picked up walking in the yard he loved and tended... had led me to put the slippers right back down on the bookcase where they had been. I had done so, carefully, so as not to dislodge the grass. Had I moved the slippers?

No.

Was leaving them there rational? Would Tom be back to walk in the yard again? Would he need them to walk around the house again?

No.

She told me my assignment in the coming month was not to read a book. Studying grief and loss is not the same thing as grieving loss. Instead, my assignment was to remove those slippers with the grass Tom had trod from my bedroom.

In so doing, I experienced, existentially and emotionally, what all the books had been reflecting – grief is love not wanting to let go. I absolutely did not want to move those slippers. It took several attempts and a good long cry.

Yet, as the poet said,

o live in this world you must be able to do three things:

*to love what is mortal;
to hold it against your bones knowing your own life depends on it;
and, when the time comes to let it go, to let it go.*

Elizabeth Kubler-Ross did a great service when she articulated stages to the grieving process denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. She did an even greater service when she observed that our experience of grief is highly personal – we each have our own story of how we live through loss. We do not all go through all five stages. And we certainly do not all go through them in a linear progression.

But what I've learned from my own experience and from your experiences is that getting through the ache of loss to acceptance, living into "a new normal" often feels completely abnormal. We are hesitant to share, even with ourselves, irrational thoughts, feelings, and actions that are a natural part of "good grief."

Patricia Monaghan did in her essay *Physics and Grief*. Less than three months after her husband, Bob, died from cancer, Patricia went to leave her house to go shopping. When she reached for her keys, they weren't there. She reasoned that since she was in the house, the keys must be in the house.

She thought about all the usual places they might be. She checked every room in the house before getting to her bedroom. When she couldn't find the keys in her bedroom,

she wrote,

I suddenly grew frustrated. I needed my keys! The only key to my car was on that ring; I could not go to work without it.

She started to cry. Even as she did so, she knew that she was “weeping for (her) greater loss, which every other loss would now reflect.”

There is great spiritual wisdom in that statement.

One of the things that makes grief so painful is that each new loss calls up, unconsciously, previous losses. So the loss of something replaceable, like a set of keys, reminds us of the loss of something irreplaceable, like the death of a loved one. Or after the death of an acquaintance or even of a public figure, we find ourselves weeping, uncontrollably, because we are reminded of the death of a loved one.

May Sarton asks, rhetorically, “Did someone say that there would be an end, an end, oh, an end to love and mourning?”

She answers, “No,” by observing

“What has been once so interwoven cannot be raveled.”

How do we cope with the multi-layers of loss in our lives?

After repeating her search through every room in the house, Patricia again ended up in the bedroom wailing. Only this time, she “began to scream at Bob, furious at him for dying and leaving (her).” She had been there in his hour of need. Where was he when she needed him? She did more than rage. She issued a challenge to the universe. She writes,

Standing in the middle of the bedroom, I demanded that he come back. Find my keys, I insisted. Find my damned keys! If there's anyone there, if there's any love left in this universe for me, find my keys!

Once she had vented her fury, she writes,

I felt mortified. I had been screaming at a dead man. Standing in my room alone, screaming at a dead man.

Patricia's story speaks to me. I did not have the experience of screaming at Tom after he died. But I did have the experience of talking out loud to him, asking him to please help me find something that was lost – the title to his truck. On one level, this one way conversation was simply a way to focus my mind on all the possible places the title might be.

But it was also irrational, and real, like Stephanie Ericsson's description of grief as “looking for a face in the crowd, knowing full well the face we want cannot be found in that crowd.”

To this day I have not found the title to the truck. I ordered a duplicate in order to donate the truck to charity. Patricia Monaghan called the car dealership in order to get a duplicate set of keys for her car; and found the spare house key. She writes,

I began to reconstruct the openings to my life. I knew now that I was indeed alone, that I could not call upon Bob for help.... It was a bleak and cruel universe, but at least I knew the truth of it.

If that were the end of grief, we would all go home, and take to our beds, for the rest of our lives. But as our hymn reminds us, "deep in the earth clod the black seed is living, when spring sounds her bugles for rousing and giving."

This is not only the story of nature. It is the story of human nature. We see meanings in what appear to be random events and wonder what is going on. These, too, are part of good grief – the stories we tell that give our losses meaning.

A year to the day that she lost her keys, Patricia Monaghan found them. She was reading in her study, waiting for dinner guests to arrive. Her thoughts drifted to her late husband and how he would have enjoyed the gathering. She looked up at her study door. There, sticking out from behind a poster advertising one of her books she noticed part of a key. When she went to see what it was, the entire missing set came out.

She stared at it in disbelief. Then she looked at the poster which advertised her book with the words, "It's here." She smiled and said out loud to her late husband, "You always did have a great sense of humor, Bob Shea."

To this day, Patricia Monaghan has no memory of dropping the keys behind the poster when they went missing. She even tried to recreate how she did it and couldn't. The set of keys kept falling through the poster to the ground. She tried throwing them at the poster. She tried catching them on the poster as she walked by. Gravity kept pulling them down. She couldn't repeat the placement of the keys so that they would stick behind the poster when the door was moved.

Does she think this proves that there's an afterlife? No. This is not the lesson she takes from her story. Rather, she writes,

I am comforted by having my keys again. We live in story, and the story of the keys now has a pleasing symmetry. But I do not know what that story means. Or, rather: I know that it can mean many things, some contradictory, but perhaps all true at the same time nonetheless.

And I am most deeply comforted by knowing that I cannot ever truly know, that the universe is so far beyond our understanding that miracles, even peculiar and rather silly ones like this one, are very likely to keep occurring.

Many of you, have shared with me, shyly, at first, your own experiences with how everything takes on significance when a loved one dies. So in a recent conversation with a parishioner, when she asked me what I think about an afterlife, I said, "I don't know." They did not offer definitive answers in any course in seminary.

But in the weeks after Tom died, I took comfort that the wisteria he planted had over 200 blossoms

and has never had as many since; that two sets of birds built nests at the same time in the two rose bushes he'd planted – which has not happened in the springs since then; and that all of his cannas bloomed that summer. For the past two years, I've been lucky to get one canna to bloom.

Does this prove the existence of an afterlife to me? No. But it did remind me of the beauty loved by my late husband. It reminded me, as he would have, of the glistening thread of life that winds onward and no one knows the secret of its beginning or its end.

What I did not share with this parishioner is that in the last weeks of Tom's life, I had taken to addressing him by the pet name "Shug." It was short for sugar...something I'd learned from a mutual friend in West Texas. I thought it would comfort Tom to be reminded of the place where he'd spent most of his life. That was, until the last week of his life when he said, matter-of-factly, "Stop calling me Doug." Suffice it to say, I immediately stopped calling him "Shug!"

A little over a month after Tom's death, was the weekend of The Towson town festival. I arrived home from church, washed my hands at the kitchen sink, and looked out the kitchen window. Caught in the branches of the rose bush outside the window, there was a small balloon. I could see only one word printed on the balloon – "Doug."

Like Patricia Monaghan, when she discovered her keys, I burst out laughing and thought, "Tom, you always did have a dry sense of humor." My rational mind needed a better explanation. I went to investigate further and discovered the balloon was an advertisement for Attorney General Doug Gansler for the November election. Evidently, it had floated from downtown Towson into my rose bush. Yet for me, that balloon meant "many things, some contradictory, but perhaps all true at the same time nonetheless," not the least of which was an intimation of love and care.

What I have learned about good grief, as had the couple whose wedding I officiated at yesterday, is, as Mary Oliver wrote,

*To live in this world you must be able to do three things:
to love what is mortal;
to hold it against your bones knowing your own life depends on it;
and, when the time comes to let it go, to let it go.*

What I learned from my grief counselor, is that the time to let go is unique to each of us. Crying to the point, in my experience, of "Googling" "Can't stop crying" to find a remedy, is not uncommon.

What I have learned about good grief from you is, as Patricia Monaghan wrote, "We live in story."

One of the spiritual tasks of good grief is, over time, to tell the narrative of our own journey through the abyss of pain, irrationality, and meaninglessness, to the summit of wonder, mystery, and love. While we cannot tell one another which story will give our losses meaning, we can listen and share, we can support each other's journey; and we can affirm, not from books, but from our own life experience, that, even when it does not seem possible, "the new normal" will someday, unexpectedly, produce a smile, laughter, and feelings of gratitude for the love that never ends and for the ongoing possibilities for our lives.

HYMN

So let our sorrow and hope now unite as we join in singing Hymn # 412.

CLOSING WORDS

We are each other's immortality. Each of us is a web of lives stretching forward and backward in time, connecting everyone we have known, everyone they have known, and everyone who will come after us. We carry each other back from the threshold of life and death.

Some part of those we loved is gone forever, but some part is ours to have and to hold and to make real in the world.

So may it be.

GO NOW IN PEACE
