

“On Grief and Gratitude”
November 17th, 2019
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As Mary Oliver says,
the trees
are turning
their own bodies
into pillars
of light,
are giving off the rich
fragrance of cinnamon
and fulfillment,

See we find ourselves in the space between summer and winter now,
between Soven and Thanksgiving, between a season of loss, of fallen
leaves, and one of celebration, festivals of birth and light.

In this transition, how can we tend to remembering the miracle of being
here? How can we turn our attention to the magic and privilege of being
alive? Because it is not always easy – there is so much separateness, and
we so desire connection. It’s as if our souls long for that free and fluent
universe of spiritual belonging, even as we exist in bodies that are fully
distinct and separate.

We try to build bridges outward, as O’Donohue writes, so that we can
transfigure the separation, so that we can feel connected to each other.
But we don’t always know how to build bridges to the dead, the people

we've lost, or the loves we never had in the first place – and the weight of that separateness can feel staggering, especially when the world around us is celebrating.

Perhaps you find yourself in the space between. The space between grief and disappointment and heartache on the one hand, and an expectation for hope and joy and mirth on the other. That can be a hard balance to hold, even though so many of us do this time of year. As we saw two weeks ago, we have all lost people we love. We all have ancestors who have returned to the womb of the earth. We all know something of letting go of someone we had held dear, or never having known them at all.

It is a season when we can feel the absence of our loved ones more deeply. Maybe someone has died, maybe a relationship has ended, a child has moved away, maybe your relationship with your family has always been painful, or you've grown weary of living alone. Grief comes in many colors and forms - sometimes it comes like a tidal wave, and sometimes it's the damp chill that we ignore until we're bone cold.

However it comes, grief calls for our attention.

There is a chaplain named Kate Braestrup who's written a popular book on grief called "Here if You Need Me." She has also said some harmful things recently, particularly to people of color, which I am not endorsing, and still her work in grief is sound. Holding that complexity, I offer you this.

Braestrup tells a beautiful story on The Moth, which is a storytelling podcast, about a young girl whose cousin dies in a snowmobile accident, and then insists on going to see his body before he is buried. Her parents are wary, concerned that it'll be too much for her, that a child shouldn't see a dead body, that it won't help. But the little girl is adamant, and her parents concede.

And Braestrup tells of this child going confidently into the funeral home, walking around her cousin's little body, laying her head down on his chest and talking to him, singing to him, putting a favorite toy into his hand. She takes her time and then finally tucks him carefully in under a quilt, because she knows he's never going to get up again, and says, in the sing-song voice of a child, "I love you Andy-dandy, goodbye."

After telling the story, Braestrup says this, which has always stuck with me, quote,

"You can trust a human being with grief. Just walk fearlessly into the house of mourning for grief is just love squaring up to its oldest enemy, and after all these mortal human years, love is up to the challenge."

When I did my chaplaincy work a few years ago – it's part of the training required to become a Unitarian Universalist minister – I took a workshop on resiliency that the hospital was offering to staff. There were all kinds of demos on different types of practices, but the primary one was a gratitude practice.

Because in all their studies they've found that one of the best ways to help bolster resiliency, even in the most difficult of situations, is

gratitude. They recommend writing down three things every day that you're grateful for, what your role was in them, and how you felt. Doing this for even two weeks can have a prolonged effect on our resilience and happiness.

Gratitude increases our ability to stay present when things get hard.

And during a season that can be so busy, when life gets thrown into sharper contrast – when the distance between our greeting card image of the holidays and the reality of how we actually feel, when that distance seems too big to hold – I wonder if gratitude can help bring us back to center.

A few weeks ago, I was at a friend's house for Canadian Thanksgiving, and despite my insistence that I wasn't on duty, my friend's grandmother thought it was only right to have me say grace. Saying grace at holiday meals being one of the professional hazards of ministry.

I think she was expecting me to say a prayer, to clasp my hands and bow my head, but I'm a UU and I doubted anyone else at the table wanted me to be so formal. So instead, I asked everyone to share something that they were grateful for. And everyone's answers were surprisingly simple.

We're thankful for each other, for good health, for being together. We're thankful for friends who move back home, for family near enough to visit, for sharing a meal together.

It's not often that we pause to do this, to sit in the tenderness of gratitude, to build those bridges outward and tell someone, simply, that we are grateful to be in their company.

But what if we did?

The holidays can be a time of noticing what's missing - our attention cast towards what should be, what could've been, pulling us from our center. If you remember a few weeks ago, when we talked about belonging to ourselves and the courage to stand alone, belonging is the process of living from our center, the practice of showing up with our whole selves. And as Brene Brown teaches over and over, that vulnerability is the birthplace of connection; it is the prerequisite to our feeling close to the people we love.

It takes courage to show up with our whole selves, especially when the world around us is covered in lights and bows and we feel the lead weight of grief or loss or loneliness. Mirth and levity and joy can feel endlessly far away in those moments, but maybe, just maybe, gratitude can be a companion to the heaviness. Gratitude for the love we've known, gratitude for all that we do have, not as a way of denying our grief, but as a way of befriending it, of being gentle with ourselves in our fullness and our complexity.

A therapist once told me that if we try to deny our hard feelings, they'll just start weight lifting in the basement. And then when they finally escape, they'll be that much stronger and harder to manage. When we acknowledge those feelings they stop getting bigger, they stop fighting so hard to get our attention. We're also being kind to ourselves and

removing the layer of guilt or shame that comes with telling ourselves that we shouldn't feel whatever it is that we do feel.

So instead of trying to lock our grief, or maybe it's sadness or shame, in the basement, so we can maintain a veneer of holiday cheer, what if we befriend it - get to know where it came from, what it needs us to pay attention to. For, like Braestrup says, "grief is just love squaring up with its oldest enemy, and after all these mortal human years, love is up to the challenge"

So as we enter this season of bustle and cheer, I invite you to consider what it is that you truly need. What part of your heart or body or mind is calling for your attention? Can you find some stillness, feel the breath in your chest, and turn your attention to someone or something you're grateful for?

This is a season that wants us to look for what's missing - with all the presents and ornaments and candles and food - we're all in a mad dash to think about what we don't have. We made the pie but forgot the cranberry sauce, or we're making lists for Santa of all the things we don't own.

What if instead we were thankful for the pie and the people we made it for, or we decided to forgo presents altogether and gave that money away, donating to some cause that matters to us and focusing on how much we do have.

And what if we made space for our grief or disappointment or loneliness when it comes, resisting the urge to mask it with false cheer or an extra

glass of wine? Because the people who love us want to know us as we are, for that is the bridge, that is the birthplace of connection. And grief paired with gratitude is very different from grief held with comparison.

I'd like to end, as we did a few weeks ago, by inviting you to share – this is another one of our traditions in this community, taking time for congregational sharing at the end of the sermon.

So I ask you this: what is it that you are grateful for today? Is there some gratitude you can hold alongside whatever heaviness you might be feeling?

Amen.