

Order of Service
Healing from Loss
Sunday, February 22, 2009

Declaration (unison reading)

Love is the spirit of this fellowship
And service is its law.
This is our great covenant:
To dwell together in peace,
To seek truth in love,
And to help one another.

- James Vila Blake

Call to Worship and Chalice Lighting

Held by each other
In beloved community
We find hope to face our trials
And courage to face our losses.
Coming together in love and acceptance,
Healing begins to move within.
Let us worship together.

Story for All Ages

Rev. Bruce Davis

There was a young Indian girl named Little Sparrow who lived where the prairie met the mountains, a long time ago before the white settlers came there. Grandfather had shared his wisdom of Nature with Little Sparrow, and she herself became wise even though she was very young. One year, after a very hard winter, Grandfather died, and the whole tribe was plunged into sadness.

Little Sparrow went off into the mountains to be in touch with her Grandfather's spirit. With her she took her little flute because she felt that it might comfort her sadness. She came to a rocky hillside and sat down to rest.

Behind her (or was it off to the side, she could not quite tell where) she heard a song, perhaps of a small bird. It sang like this:

a, g, e, d.....a, g, e, d.....

Suddenly a thought came into her heart. "I wonder if that's Grandfather's spirit!" She took her little flute, and she asked a musical question, that meant, "Grandfather, is that you?"

a, g, e, d....a, g, e, d....

Then Little Sparrow just listened silently to see if she could hear Grandfather's voice.

(Ted plays his first theme)

Little Sparrow was so happy to hear the musical voice of Grandfather. With her little flute she asked, "Grandfather where are you?"

a, g, e, d....a, g, e, d....

(Ted plays second theme)

A tear came to Little Sparrow's eye. How much she missed Grandfather. It was good that he was so near. With her little flute she asked her Grandfather, "Will you always answer me when I call?"

a, g, e, d....a, g, e, d....

(Ted plays final theme)

Little Sparrow felt deeply comforted by the music that she heard, and she departed for home in peace. Let it now be the time for you to depart for your classrooms, also in peace. Let's form an archway at the center aisle.

(Ted and Gayle play "Go Now In Peace.")

Meditation and Prayer

Coming into this very moment

We encounter this body that we are.

Though we may not be counted among the wise,

This body is wise.

We feel what is in this body,

How the hurt may weigh heavy in our heart,

How the fear may press against our throat,
How the worry may churn in our gut,
How the loss may ache in our limbs.

We feel what is here
And it begins to release.
We pay attention to the letting go,
And the healing begins.

Healing now in the benevolent
Silence...
Amen.

Reading "The Well of Grief," by David Whyte

Those who will not slip beneath the still surface
On the well of grief,
Turning down through the dark water
To the place we cannot breathe,

Will never know the place from which we drink
The secret water, cold and clear,

Nor find in the darkness glimmering,
The small round coins thrown by those
Who wished for something else.

Sermon *Healing from Loss* Rev. Bruce Davis (2174)

Having listened on U-Tube recently to the wonderful "Last Lecture" of virtual reality professor Randy Pausch, who died after a year of fighting pancreatic cancer, I've thought a lot about what my last sermon might be like.. The "last lecture" is a form that teachers use to offer ultimate messages and

bottom lines. Near his own death, Randy declares, “Love for my wife and children is what matters most of all!”

This is not my last lecture. I have found a home here at Evergreen, and, if the fates allow, I’ll be part of this beloved community for a long time yet. But if you asked me, “What’s the bottom line? What’s life for?” I’d say it’s about two things.

First, I agree with Randy Pausch. Life is about love. And for me love of family is paramount. Throughout our lives we learn about love, then we practice love, in time we get better at loving, and if we’re lucky we begin to blend love with wisdom by the end of our lives. We start with superficial love and grow in time toward deep love. We start with love of one or two persons and broaden into an expansive love that embraces whole communities and even the interconnected web of life itself. First, and foremost, life is about love.

Second, life is about letting go. Because, all those things in this world with which we form loving connection, will in their time pass on from us. Or, we may pass away from *them*. The world we’re in is constructed with impermanence built in. And yet, in the context of the love in our lives, it’s really hard let go. Just as surely as we have to *learn* to love, we have to *learn* to let go. We have to take it in steps. First we learn about the need of letting go, then we practice letting go, and eventually, if we’re lucky, we learn to weave grace and pain together in those moments of inevitable loss.

How odd that the two-part bottom line of my last lecture would contain such a profound paradox. Life is for making loving connections. Succeeding with those connections, life is then for the letting go of them.

Poet Mary Oliver speaks about this tension in one of her poems. Reading and re-reading this poem is a powerful spiritual practice, as in its own way the twelve-step serenity prayer is a powerful practice. I imagine for a moment someone I love, someone who has become enormously dear to me. Someone like one of my children. Then I read the poem:

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.

Even not speaking of death, those of us who are parents know that our children will not stay small and vulnerable and cute. Sure we hold them against our bones, with the intensity of life itself, when they are five or six. But by the time they are 12 or 13, or again by the time they are 18 or 19 or 36 or 64, we realize that we can't hold them and protect them in the same way we used to. They *need* us to let them go so that they can form the basis of their own self-confidence, their own life-grounding, and their own life choices. Yes, the loss of a loved one into death is huge. And yet, we practice for such loss in every change, in every transformation, of our evolving relationships.

I was with a friend one day, the mother of two teenage girls. To say that my friend doted on her daughters is an understatement. She'd protected them at every turn. And yet, they'd inherited the same independent spirit that she had. They were ready to break free of what had been a loving if somewhat co-dependent relationship. Every week they were stretching their limits, and tearing at their mother's heartstrings.

The day I was with my friend, she'd become aware, all of a sudden, that she could no longer protect her daughters from a sometimes evil, sometimes dangerous world. A car could crash. An unsafe thing might happen in an unsafe place. She would not be there to prevent it. Suddenly she realized the depth of her powerlessness in the face of the vulnerability of her now nearly adult daughters. She had no choice. She needed to let go of her little girls. And to do that she needed to mourn the passing.

This realization had been building subconsciously for many months, and when it broke into her consciousness, it flooded over her all at once. That morning it truly looked as if she'd just gotten news of her daughters' death. She cried. No, she wailed. She really freaked out in a major panic attack. I sat with her and invited her to feel what was in her body. There was a heavy, burning pain in her thighs and lower abdomen, the physical equivalent of her emotional distress. It was as if she were experiencing her labor pains all over again, birthing a new

era of her motherhood. Slowly, by being present to the physical sensations, they began to resolve. What was also remarkable is that the emotions themselves seemed to lessen as she attended to the physical sensations.

What I know about this woman is that by dying to her daughters as little girls, unable to take care of themselves, she became reborn as the mother of adult women, able to offer guidance and wisdom on their passage into adulthood.

I introduce the word healing here. What her body did was heal from a profound sense of loss that she experienced, and her psyche underwent healing as well. Notice that the process was spontaneous. We call this grief or mourning. It hurts while we go through the pain, but if we do this emotional work in body and psyche, there is healing in it for us.

The spontaneity of this process means that it will rise over us, like the flooding tide. Grief may not hit us right away with the news of loss; it may take some time for the reality to set in. Like the rising tide, it goes almost by itself if we let it. Poet David Whyte describes a moment of his own grief in this poem:

Last night they came with news of death
Not knowing what I would say.
I wanted to say the green wind is running through the fields
Making the grass lie flat.
I wanted to say
The apple blossom flakes like ash
Covering the orchard wall.
I wanted to say the fish float belly up in the slow stream
Stepping stones to the dead.
They asked me if I would sleep that night.
I said I did not know.
For this loss I could not speak
The tongue lay idle
In a great darkness.
The heart was strangely open.

The moon had gone.
And it was then when I said
He is no longer here
That the night put its arms all around me
And all the white stars turned bitter with grief.

Author Marshall Rosenberg refers to this inevitable and necessary healing process as “Sorrowing.” We plunge to the depths of our sorrow. If we will feel honestly what is there for us, as much as we are able, a sort of alchemy takes place. In time the heaviness of body and psyche give way. The pain turns into something like freedom from the bonds of grief and we are transformed into a new being.

Grieving and sorrowing for our losses is a human need, present throughout the world. In parts of Africa, those who suffer loss hire professional mourners to help them experience and display their grief. In India gathered family and friends mourn the loss together, experiencing as a community this process of sorrowing. Here, where our culture is much more reserved about open expression of emotion, especially public displays of wailing in our grief, we’ve created different grief rituals. Our sorrowing process may involve a weekly trip to the therapist, who can facilitate our facing and feeling the pain of loss. Those who have lost loved ones in Israel may retire to the Wailing Wall from time to time, until their grief heals.

In the wonderful book, *The Secret Life of Bees*, by Sue Monk Kidd, the character May Boatwright loses her twin sister at a young age. May is usually filled with the delight of living, until an event in her day reminds her once again of the loss of what had felt like the other half of her self. She has created a ritual of going out behind the house, to her own wailing wall of stones that she has built over the years with her own hands. There she may weep freely. In her ritual of healing, she writes down on slips of paper whatever loss has reminded her of her deep sorrow, and she tucks these messages of mourning into the cracks between the stones. By the time she returns to the family, she is again the picture of happiness. Some loss is so big for us that the healing process continues life long.

But many of us try to escape from the rising tide of our grief. For many of us, to actually experience the loss is too painful or just too inconvenient. Over many years of medical practice I tried to hide from my grief. I spent my whole career in medicine doing just what Mary Oliver said we must do.

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.

I loved these people I worked with, many with life-threatening or terminal conditions. I held them against my bones, trying to support their lives and their wellbeing as if my own life depended on it. Then, in their time, they passed on. But I wasn't letting myself do the hard work of letting them go, of mourning the losses.

I remember a child of seven who fought heroically against cancer, suffering the pain of his condition, bearing the indignities of medical tests and treatments. Walking with this youngster toward a premature death was very hard for me. When the time came, I found it hard to accept that he had died. I suppose at some level I was pretending that he was still alive, that he was not gone forever.

In my decades of medical practice I delayed my own grief work, losing myself time and again into the stories and situations of the living. I never went to my wailing wall. I never wrote the names on pieces of paper and tucked them between the stones. I just kept moving forward. From time to time, like May Boatwright, the rising tide of my grief would burst through a sea wall. I remember coming home from a late shift in the ER, turning on the TV to calm down. There'd be some movie, or even some commercial, that reminded me of my grief, and without warning I'd burst into tears, letting my sorrow flow, healing myself from all that loss.

Alexandra, a wise spiritual director I worked with shortly after my physician years, realized that I was carrying a burden of unresolved grief. It was

she who first invited me into ways of moving into and through that grief. I remember when she offered me this counsel: “Bruce, you will only ever experience as much joy as you allow yourself to feel your sorrow. Your loss opens the door for your grieving. And your grieving opens the door for the movement of spirit at the depths of your soul. And that deep movement of spirit opens into healing, spiritual growth, and golden memory.”

Healing from loss does make it easier to go on with our lives. But what Alexandra was saying is that there’s more to successful sorrowing than simply surviving. Grief transforms us from what we were into something new, as the fabled magic spinning wheel turns straw into gold. Loss catapults us into a practice of grieving that yields the added dividend of spiritual growth. Denying the deaths and shunning the losses, we miss one of life’s deepest teachings. From David Whyte, again:

Those who will not slip beneath the still surface
On the well of grief,
Turning down through the dark water
To the place we cannot breathe,

Will never know the place from which we drink
The secret water, cold and clear,

What is this “secret water” at the depths of our grief? It’s beautifully rendered by Jesus of Nazareth in his Sermon on the Mount, captured by the Gospel writer, Matthew: “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.” The literary construction here is termed “the divine passive.” The comfort implied is the divine itself, arising from what Jesus calls, “the Kingdom of Heaven within” ourselves.

Living our loss, feeling the pain in body and mind, we will be comforted by the movement of spirit of life within. It doesn’t matter what name we call that moving spirit. What matters is that we let it move and that we feel what we feel, allowing the grief, and with it the healing, into our lives.

This movement of spirit, born of the juxtaposition of the love and loss in all our lives, brings us to that deepest place of love. We are moved beyond the impermanence of this world, into a loving presence that will forever endure.

Amen.