

Honoring Our Grief¹

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Allen Avenue Unitarian Universalist Church

This weekend we celebrated Halloween, a modern secular holiday, but also an ancient spiritual festival that connects us with the great circle of life. In the Celtic tradition it is called Samhein, and is a time when we are able to feel our bonds with all people who have come before us and who will come after us. It is a time when we draw near to those we love, both living and dead. We give thanks for the kinship we feel between us, and the vast circle of life on our planet.

At the beginning of our worship we held a family ritual to remember those we love who have died.

Reading: Excerpt from “Everything Doesn't Happen for a Reason” Tim Lawrence²

Grief is brutally painful. Grief does not only occur when someone dies. When relationships fall apart, you grieve. When opportunities are shattered, you grieve. When dreams die, you grieve. When illnesses wreck you, you grieve.

So I'm going to repeat a few words I've uttered countless times; words so powerful and honest they tear at the hubris of [anyone] who participates in the debasing of the grieving:

Some things in life cannot be fixed. They can only be carried.

These words come from my dear friend Megan Devine... These words are so poignant because they aim right at the pathetic platitudes our culture has come to embody on an increasingly hopeless level. Losing a child cannot be fixed. Being diagnosed with a debilitating illness cannot be fixed. Facing the betrayal of your closest confidante cannot be fixed. They can only be carried. ...

I've grieved many times in my life. I've been overwhelmed with shame and self-hatred so strong it's nearly killed me.

The ones who helped—the only ones who helped—were those who were there. And said nothing. In that nothingness, they did everything.

I am here—I have lived—because they chose to love me. They loved me in their silence, in their willingness to suffer with me, alongside me, and through me. They loved me in their desire to be as uncomfortable, as destroyed, as I was, if only for a week, an hour, even just a few minutes.

Sermon

How do we learn to honor our grief? In our society, we are encouraged to minimize our grief, to put on a brave face for the world, to continue to function. Most workplaces offer three days for bereavement, if that. When something crushes us to the ground, we are supposed to dust ourselves off and get going again. Hide our tears.

How do we learn to honor our grief? Grief makes everyone uncertain and uncomfortable. People often don't know how to respond to a friend who is grieving. They say un-comforting things like, “He is in a better place,” or “God must have wanted her among the angels.” Or when something horrible happens, people might say, “Everything happens for a reason.” or “Something good will come of this.”

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2 <http://www.timjlawrence.com/blog/2015/10/19/everything-doesnt-happen-for-a-reason>

But, as Tim Lawrence writes in our reading today, platitudes don't help anyone. What helps is to be present to someone right where they are, not saying anything. Or saying, simply, "I acknowledge your pain. I am here with you."³ Just that. Because grief is about a world coming undone, everything falling apart. Grief is about being in that devastated landscape between what was, and an unknown future.

How do we learn to honor our grief? We begin by acknowledging that grief exists: it is not an aberration, it is not pathological, it is a normal part of human life. We are learning that it is also a part of animal life. It is rooted deep within our DNA, our biology, our emotional repertoire. Grief exists because we are fundamentally connected to those we love. The deeper the connection, the deeper the grief we experience when that bond is lost or broken.

We also must acknowledge that there is no one right way to grieve. It takes many forms. It might be tears and sobbing, or it might be numbness. It might be anger, or it might be anxiety, or even laughter. It might be a tightness in your chest, or a heaviness in your arms and shoulders. There are as many ways to grieve as there are people, as there are days in a year. Some people need time alone to grieve. Others need desperately to be with other people.

How do we learn to honor our grief? I remember times when I was grieving, some part of my brain was working furiously trying to figure out what to do, how to escape from this horrible pain. Should I call a friend? Who could I call? Should I go for a walk, should I go back to bed? Should I try to read a book or watch TV? But then, I couldn't stand doing that either. In the middle of this frantic attempt to escape, I remembered something a therapist had told me: feel the feelings. Just keep breathing and feel the feelings.

We carry many forms of grief. We grieve for the losses we experience in our personal journey. But we also grieve for the troubles experienced by those we love. And we grieve for the losses facing our wider society. It seemed as if the whole nation was grieving when the twin towers in New York collapsed on September 11, in 2001. Even if we didn't know someone personally who was lost in that tragedy, we felt our hearts open to the suffering.

We may also grieve for the past. Last weekend, I saw a movie called *The Canary Effect*,⁴ that looked at the history of relations between the U.S. government and Indigenous peoples on this continent. My heart felt torn open by the stories it told, stories that are often hidden in our culture, stories that reside at the root of our society and still affect us today. How can we celebrate Columbus, if we acknowledge that when he landed on that Caribbean Island, and spoke of how gentle and welcoming the people were, his next sentence was how with fifty men he could make slaves of them all?

And when he and his men returned on future visits, they did kill and torture and steal and destroy those gentle and welcoming human beings. I didn't weep during the film, but our group leader helped me honor my grief when she said sometimes our grief feels like a tightness in our chest, or a leaden feeling in our belly. She offered us a few minutes of silence to notice how we were experiencing what we had seen. Her words and her silence acknowledged and named our grief for the history of our country.

3 Ibid.

4 Directed by Robin Davey and Yellow Thunder Woman. <http://thecanaryeffectmovie.com>

We can also feel grief for the future. Joanna Macy speaks about how important it is to honor our pain for the earth. We are living in a time of mass extinction, and perilous changes to the ecosystem that could bring further devastation to our world. This week the Portland Press Herald has written about changes that have occurred because of the warming of the ocean waters off the coast of Maine. Species that we know and love are in danger of losing viable habitat in our home. Lobsters, salmon, puffins, clams. Will they survive into the next generations? And what of the people who eat them?

All over the earth similar disruptions are taking place. The very fabric of our familiar planet is being rent and torn. When Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh was asked, “What do we most need to do to save our world?” he replied, “What we most need to do is hear within ourselves the sounds of the Earth crying.”⁵

Fundamental to healing, to our hope for the future, is to acknowledge and honor our pain for the world. More than fixing carbon or using less oil, we need to open up to the experience of being fully in communion with the web of all living beings.

In Joanna Macy's the *Work that Reconnects*, the first step is to express our gratitude for all the beauty in our lives and in our world. The second step is honoring our pain for the world. We must acknowledge it, and validate it as a wholesome response. As with our personal grief, we must let ourselves experience the pain, rather than try to fix it or minimize it. Macy suggests we take the risk to express it to others, and recognize in fact how widely it is shared. We must not offer each other platitudes, but connection.

Our pain for the world can be our deepest ally in the work of healing our planet. This is because our grief brings us evidence of our interconnection with all beings. Our grief for the world springs from our love and connectedness. We only grieve because the fabric of our connection has been torn. And what the earth most needs are human beings who fully experience their interconnection with the vast web of life. When we know in our bones that sense of interconnection, we will have the wisdom and compassion and strength to go forward.

China Galland says, “Our choice is to be in love or in fear. But to choose to be in love means to have a mountain inside of you, means to have the heart of the world inside you, means you will feel another's suffering inside your own body and you will weep. You will have no protection from the world's pain because it will be your own.”⁶

Meditation: Breathing Through

Joanna Macy⁷

How do we learn to honor our grief for the world and for ourselves? Joanna Macy offers a meditation that I have found helpful. I will share that meditation with you now.

I invite you to close your eyes, if that feels comfortable to you,
or gaze softly at the chalice light.

Focus your attention on your breathing.

You don't have to breathe in any particular way.

Just watch your breathing as it happens, in and out.

5 Quoted in Joanna Macy & Molly Brown, *Coming Back to Life*, (New Society Publishers, 2014) p. 105-6.

6 From *Longing for Darkness*, quoted in Macy & Brown.

7 Slightly adapted, from Joanna Macy & Molly Brown, p. 276-8.

Note the sensations of the air in your nostrils or lips, in your chest or abdomen.
Stay passive and alert, like a cat by a mouse hole...

As you watch the breath, notice that it happens by itself, without your will.
You don't have to decide each time to inhale and exhale.
It is as if you are being breathed, as if life is breathing you.
Just as everyone in this room is being breathed by life,
everyone in this city, in this planet is being breathed by life,
all sustained in a vast, living breathing web...

Now, imagine your breath as a stream or ribbon of air.
See it flowing up through your nose, down through your windpipe and into your lungs.
From your lungs, imagine it going through your heart.
Picture it flowing through your heart and out, to reconnect with the larger web of life.
Let this ribbon of air, as it passes through you and through your heart,
appear as one loop within that vast web, connecting you with it...

Now, as you continue breathing,
I invite you to open your awareness to the suffering that is present in the world.
Drop for now all defenses and open to your knowledge of that suffering.
Let it come as concretely as you can...

Images of your fellow beings in pain and need, in fear or isolation,
in prisons, hospitals, on the streets, in refugee camps
No need to strain for these images;
they are present to you by virtue of our interbeing.
Relax and just let them surface...
the vast and countless hardships of our fellow humans,
and of our animal brothers and sisters as well,
as they swim the seas and fly the air of this planet.

Breathe in these images of hardship and pain
as if they were small granules of sand on the stream of air,
or tiny pebbles on that ribbon of breath,
flowing up through your nose, down through your trachea and lungs
and out again through your heart, into the world's interconnected net.
You are asked to do nothing in this moment, but let them pass through your heart.

Be sure that the stream flows through and out again;
don't hang on to the pain...
Surrender it for now to the healing resources of life's vast web...

With Shantideva, the Buddhist saint, we can say,
"Let all sorrows ripen in me."
We help them ripen by passing them through our hearts
making good rich compost out of all that grief
enhancing our larger, collective knowing...

If no images or feelings arise and there is only blankness, gray and numb,
breath that through also...
That numbness is a real part of our world...

And if what surfaces is not the pain of other beings,
so much as your own personal suffering, breathe that through too.
Your own anguish is an integral part of the grief of our world, and arises with it...

Should you feel an ache in the chest, a pressure in the rib cage,
as if the heart would break, that is all right.
Your heart is not an object that can break...
But if it were, they say the heart that breaks open can hold the whole universe.
Your heart is that large. Trust it.
Let us keep breathing together in silence
letting the ribbon of air flow into our lungs
and out through our heart into the web of life.

(chime)

Please remain seated, and join in another meditation on breathing.
There are three parts in this chant. We'll start with a drone, then after two times through add the melody, and then after two more times, add the descant. Feel free to sing whatever parts are comfortable for you.

Closing Hymn: Meditation on Breathing⁸ Sara Dan Jones
When I breathe in, I breathe in peace.
When I breathe out, I breathe out love.

Closing Words:

I invite you to rise now, and join hands for our closing words.
Notice the warmth of the hand that is holding yours.
This hand is flowing with the blood of a beating heart, a heart just like your own.
This hand has known joy and clapped with delight at the songs of birds.
This hand has known sorrow, and also comforted those who were suffering.
This hand belongs to a person living in the same earth time
and earth space as you are living,
together you are part of one breathing web of life.
Take a moment of silent gratitude for this hand you are holding in your own.
Blessed be.

As we go forward with our day today,
let us be mindful to be gentle with our hearts and the hearts of those around us.
As we extinguish the flame of this chalice,
let each of us carry its light into every day of our lives.

⁸ Words and music Sara Dan Jones, Copyright 2001, in *Singing the Journey* (Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association, 2005) #1009.