

Loss and Kindness¹
Rev. Myke Johnson
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Allen Avenue Unitarian Universalist Church

Our reading today was from *Wild Comfort²* by Kathleen Dean Moore. Here is an excerpt:

... I don't know what sorrow does to the world, what it adds or takes away. What I think I do know now is that sorrow is part of the earth's great cycles, flowing into the night like cool air sinking down a river course.

To feel sorrow is to float on the pulse of the earth, the surge from living to dying, from coming into being to ceasing to exist. Maybe this is why ... even though sorrow never disappears, it can make a deeper connection to the currents of life and so connect, somehow, to sources of wonder and solace. I don't know.

Sermon

I have been reading the novel *Olive Kitteridge* this past week, recommended by a few women in our church. There is a scene that haunts me with the starkness of loss. One morning, Olive and her husband Henry, both retired now, are doing errands—

They drove into town, into the parking lot of the big Shop 'n Save. Olive was going to stay in the car and read the paper while [Henry] went in to get the milk and orange juice and a jar of jam. "Anything else?" He said those words. Olive shook her head. Henry opened the door, swung his long legs out. The creak of the opening car door, the back of his plaid jacket, then the bizarre, unnatural motion of him falling right from that position to the ground.³

Henry suffers a stroke which robs him of sight and language and understanding. Olive is virtually alone. In one ordinary moment, her life has come undone.

Halloween is occasioned by unnatural terrors: haunted houses, horror movies, and zombies abound. Yet, these are but clownish reflections of the greatest terror—the ability of Life to come undone, the losses that break our hearts, the starkness of death.

When I was six years old, some old family friends that we saw about once a year, the Turners, had a fire in their house. It killed their oldest daughter, Christine, who was my age. We children were shielded from the tragedy of this loss—I am sure my parents spoke of it in comforting religious metaphors: Christine went to heaven to be with Jesus. In later years, when we visited the family, I don't remember ever talking about Christine, as I played with her younger sister, Vicky. I think now about the grief, hidden, that her parents and siblings must have walked with everyday.

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2 Found in "Sorrow, Gladness, and the Stream of Living Things," *Utne Reader*, Jul-Aug 2010, p. 62.

3 Elizabeth Strout, *Olive Kitteridge*, p. 146.

When I was about thirteen, there was another tragic death in our family's circle of friends. Ron, in his twenties, was killed in a car accident. This time, the grief was visible to us, and wide open. His young wife Diane was overcome with agony—she wept and wailed during the funeral, and had to be held up by family members as we walked from our cars to the gravesite.

How vulnerable we are. Walking down a city street, or looking around this room, we may not be able to see it right away. People laugh and go about their conversations, their daily errands. But underneath, there are hidden wounds in our hearts. If we live long enough, we all are wounded by loss. And any moment that axe could fall on anyone of us. Remember that, the next time you are waiting in line at the grocery store—bored, impatient: those in the line with you have suffered, their hearts have been broken, their eyes have streamed with tears, or held back tears. Every day someone's life is coming undone.

But mostly we hide all that. We live in a culture of boundless positivity. We have made almost a national religion of positive thinking. So it is almost heresy to remind people about our suffering. We have a magical idea that positivity will protect us from suffering—that tragedy can only strike if we let down our guard. We believe that if we could just control everything we would be safe. It is not true. Things don't always turn out for the best. We don't always succeed in our goals. Relationships die, children become estranged from their parents, conflicts fester, pain becomes chronic.

The only real answer to suffering is kindness. When we realize that all of us suffer, that all of us face loss and death; when we remember the hidden wounds every person is carrying, it is more natural to treat each other with greater tenderness. We realize how much we need each other. How much we are alike. Compassion means *to suffer with*.

Naomi Shihab Nye⁴ writes:

Before you know what kindness really is
you must lose things,
feel the future dissolve in a moment
like salt in a weakened broth.
What you held in your hand,
what you counted and carefully saved,
all this must go so you know
how desolate the landscape can be
between the regions of kindness.
How you ride and ride
thinking the bus will never stop,
the passengers eating maize and chicken
will stare out the window forever.

4 From "Kindness" in *Words From Under the Words: Selected Poems*. The complete poem is found in numerous online sources.

There is always the temptation to close our hearts—to stare out the window, close off our feelings, and try to wall away the possibility of loss. But then, life itself becomes caged in by that fear, becomes smaller and smaller. When we embrace the suffering of life, it opens us, connects us. There is a reason that people bring food to the family of someone who has died—it is the deepest sacrament of communion. By sharing food, we are bringing them back into the circle of connection, the circle of all who have known loss and love. Life is woven in the connections between us, in the touching and tenderness, the seeing and being seen, the eating together and the sweetness of chocolate.

Loss and sorrow open our hearts to the gift of kindness. Nye goes on to write:

Before you know kindness as the deepest thing inside,
you must know sorrow as the other deepest thing.

You must wake up with sorrow.
You must speak to it till your voice
catches the thread of all sorrows
and you see the size of the cloth.

Then it is only kindness that makes sense anymore,
only kindness that ties your shoes
and sends you out into the day to mail letters and purchase bread,
only kindness that raises its head
from the crowd of the world to say
it is I you have been looking for,
and then goes with you every where
like a shadow or a friend.

The only real answer to loss is kindness. The only answer to death is love.

After her husband's stroke, Olive Kitteridge felt cut off from life, sitting alone in her house. But when she is invited to visit her son, something stirs in her. She rides a plane for the first time, and sees the fields and the sea far below in the morning sun. Strout writes, "--then Olive felt something she had not expected to feel again: a sudden surging greediness for life. She leaned forward, peering out the window: sweet pale clouds, the sky as blue as your hat, the new green of the fields, the broad expanse of water—seen from up here it all appeared wondrous, amazing. She remembered what hope was, and this was it. That inner churning that moves you forward, plows you through life the way the boats below plowed in the shiny water, the way the plane was plowing forward to a place new, and where she was needed. She had been asked to be a part of her son's life."⁵

5 *Olive Kitteridge*, pp. 202-3.

I remember, at the lowest point in my life, after my break-up with the man who was my first love, it was all I could do to get out of bed in the morning. I dragged myself to classes—I was in seminary in Chicago, which helped because I was able to find a room in campus housing. It was in the middle of a snowy winter. There was a support group at the school for divorced and separated women, a circle of about ten women, which felt to me like a lifeboat throwing out a line into the deep water in which I was almost drowning. I could bring my grief to this listening circle of kindness and possibility. I could express my sorrow.

There was a peculiar pressure put on seminary students to have it all together—we weren't supposed to have problems like divorce or the break-up of our families. John Shea tells the story of a well-known Christian theologian who had recently gone through a much-publicized divorce. He was walking down a crowded street in Manhattan when he saw Abraham Joshua Heschel, the Jewish mystic and activist. Heschel threw his arms around the theologian's shoulders, and said, "I must tell you of my great grandfather, the most famous Rabbi in Eastern Europe. He too was divorced." The theologian began to silently weep.⁶

Shea says, "We need to join the company of the broken without leaving the company of the great. And we need a friend to grip our shoulders or hold our hand as we walk toward the newness we will someday call home." The only real answer to loss is kindness.

It is in opening to the sorrows of life, to the kindness of compassion, that we enter into the deeper rhythms of life, the reality of Life. Life has always been about birth and death, change and growth and decay. Rainer Maria Rilke reminds us, that the things of earth teach us to trust our heaviness, to let ourselves fall. "Even a bird has to do that before he can fly."⁷

In the middle of writing these thoughts about loss and kindness, I took a walk among the trees, golden with leaves falling. The ground was carpeted with red and yellow, and the sun was warm and bright. I am always astonished at the beauty of the autumn, despite the many autumns I have seen in my time. How the trees seem to glow while they are letting go of their leaves. How death comes in this blaze of glory.

Of course, in autumn, the trees don't really die, they merely let go of their leaves; we know they will come back again. But there is such beauty in this letting go. The trees seem to sink into the stillness of their loss, stark and shapely against the blue blue skies, as the days grow shorter and shorter in the slow turning of the earth toward the cold and ice of winter. The trees don't hide their emptiness, but reveal the shape of branches that have been hidden during the long green summer. They are naked and open with their loss. Perhaps they give us permission to remember all the old losses, the old sorrows.

6 John Shea, "Walking Each Other Home," found at http://www.beliefnet.com/story/102/story_10230_1.html

7 From *Rilke's Book of Hours: Love Poems to God*, translated by Anita Barrows and Joanna Macy, II, 16.

And so during this time of falling leaves here in the north, comes the great festival of the dead—and we are told that our loved ones are close by during this time, and sometimes I can feel that. When I remember my first love, who died just three years after our parting, I remember now the tenderness we shared, and his great belief in the power of compassion. I remember how he cherished me as I was learning to become myself. I remember the way our loss broke open my heart and deepened my capacity for forgiveness and humility and trust.

In Mexico, families gather on the Day of the Dead in the cemetery where their loved ones are buried; they bring picnics and music and they party through the night until dawn comes. It matters that they are all there together—a cemetery is a very different place when we are together than when we are alone. Life calls to us in the voices of people there with us, in the music and dancing, in the flowers and sweet candies, in the smiles of children. There may be some sad songs, but there are also funny songs. I read once that an old Mexican priest said, we are not sad in the cemetery, because our loved ones are still with us.

We don't have that gift here in Maine—to be picnicking with the generations, and the community—in the garden of the bones of our ancestors, surrounded by marigolds. But we do have the golden falling leaves of trees. We have the smiling faces of children excited about chocolate. And so we collect the spirits of our ancestors through our memories, we call them back from the four corners of the world, by naming their names; and we have this circle of kindness in which to sing our songs.

In the face of loss, kindness is what matters. In the face of death, we are called to love.