

Living with Loss¹

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Allen Avenue Unitarian Universalist Church

Reading: Louise Erdrich is a Native American writer from the Anishinaabeg people. Our reading was an excerpt from her novel, The Painted Drum. The following is a short excerpt from that reading.

“...And the wolf answered, not in words, but with a continuation of that stare. ‘We live because we live.’ He did not ask questions. He did not give reasons. And I understood him then. The wolves accept the life they are given. They do not look around them and wish for a different life, or shorten their lives resenting the humans, or even fear them any more than is appropriate. ... They deal with what they encounter and then go on. Minute by minute. One day to the next...”²

Sermon

I used to believe that all painful things could be made right and healed. When I was in sixth grade, I tried out for the cheerleading squad at my school in Detroit, Michigan. I was so happy when I learned that I had made the team for seventh grade. But then my family moved to Sheridan, Wyoming. I lost out on being a cheerleader. I started seventh grade not knowing a soul at my new school. It was a lonely beginning. But there was a drama club and I played Mrs. Gibbs in the production of “Our Town.” There was a science club. In May, I became best friends with a girl named Patricia Ann Rhodes. I always remembered her name because she used her initials PAR to remember how to spell the word “separate.”

A few months later, I was separated from my new best friend because we moved back to Michigan, to a small town called Howell. I was going into eighth grade, and once again, beginning over. It was a repeated pattern in my childhood, and then many times as an adult as well. Each move had a reason to it, but each move increased the sense of loss in my heart. I was reminded about these moves when I attended an event to celebrate the publication of a book about immigrants in Maine, called *New Mainers*. Many of the speakers told poignant stories of war and violence and the loss of family members. Many of them spoke about missing the homes they had to leave.

Even though I never suffered in a war, or had to learn a new language or experience suspicion because of the color of my skin, I knew what it felt like to be adrift in a new land, looking for a way to anchor myself. I knew the feeling of not being able to go home again. Not because of war and violence, but because there was no place that was home. There were too many moves and too many years gone by. Even my parents had moved on and now they live in West Virginia, where I have never lived.

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² *The Painted Drum*, (HarperCollins: 2005) p. 119-121.

I used to believe that all painful things could be made right and healed. For many years, I kept thinking that I might find a place that felt exactly like the home I always wanted. But now I understand that I won't ever have that familiarity born of longevity. I won't have those friends that go back to kindergarten. Now I understand that some things are lost forever. There is a homelessness that comes from migration, and it is a part of my life. It isn't possible to get rid of it, or fix it. It is the life I have been given.

Then, I read a novel by Linda Hogan about a different human situation. Called *People of the Whale*, it was about a woman who was a member of an indigenous tribe on the west coast of North America. Her people had lived in their home for thousands of years. But their way of life had been decimated by the encroachment of white civilization. Many were alcoholics. This woman married her childhood sweetheart, and they were happy together for several months, but then he went to Vietnam, and was missing in action. She raised their son alone, and lived on her fishing boat in the harbor. Years later, some members of the tribe wanted to begin hunting the whale again, but she believed they were going about it the wrong way. There was greed and corruption in the tribal council. When she protested the whale hunt, half the people in her town were angry with her.

Suddenly I was struck by her very different experience of loss—almost the opposite of my own lack of rootedness. Here was a woman firmly rooted to a place and a community, but that meant she was stuck with the brokenness of her own people. She was stuck with the greed and violence and divisions among them. She carried the loneliness of holding values not shared by her neighbors. Her experience wasn't at all like my fantasy of what having a hometown would be like. I realized that in my wandering, at least I was able to form connections with kindred souls. I could create a community of choice around shared values.

It is so easy to imagine that if something were different about our lives, all would be well. But each of us has a burden to carry. Every one of us experiences some loss in our lives. Every person has some pain in their hearts. Even the ones who seem healthy and wealthy and living the good life. I have long been in a position to have deep conversations with people. In those conversations, I have often been surprised by the pain that people have shared with me, the heavy burden of what they were feeling hidden under a placid surface. Now when I walk down a city street, and see the faces of the people going by, I remember those conversations. I believe that each person I meet might have a hidden story of loss.

There is an old Buddhist tale about a woman whose child died suddenly. She was devastated, and couldn't believe the child was really dead. She brought the child to the Buddha, begging him to revive the baby. He told her, "I can help you, but first you must go find me a mustard seed." She wiped her tears and said, "Oh yes, I will find it." "But," he added, "It cannot be just any mustard seed. This mustard seed must be from a house that has never known the death of a loved one."

She set out to the houses of all her neighbors, asking for a mustard seed. They were eager to help her, but when she inquired whether they had known the death of a loved one, there was no house without a grief to share. Eventually she returned to the Buddha and said sadly, "I do not have the mustard seed. Every house has known the loss of a loved one."

“I know,” he said. “But have you found the medicine you need?” She answered, “I think I understand now. We cannot free our lives from suffering, but we can live with compassion for each other.” She went on to bring kindness and care to her neighbors, and in that way found comfort for her own loss.

The first part of learning to live with loss is to understand that all human beings share in this experience. Loss may make us feel lonely, but we are tied by a million threads of connection to other broken hearts. Loss is an inevitable part of human life. 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.³

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.” When we share our sorrow with a friend, the sorrow does not go away, but we have the chance to experience that larger connection, that common bond of the great and the lowly.

We humans are so quick to want to fix everything, to tidy up the messy process of our human emotions. We feel guilty if we are not happy and successful in every minute. We are uncomfortable with tears, with anger, with despair. People often assume that ministers, and other such counselors, have some magic tools at our disposal to make pain go away. It is not like that. Hopefully, what we have learned is how to sit still within the messiness, to walk with people in the dark and painful places of the heart. We have learned that sharing and listening to pain will not destroy us, but can bring us into deeper communion with our fellow travelers.

It is not easy for us humans to be welcoming to all that is. Animals seem to do it so much better. Perhaps that is why it can be so comforting to weep in the presence of a beloved dog. The dog will stay right with us in our pain. He doesn’t have to fix anything, but accepts us just as we are. We have a lot we could learn from our dogs. They are like the wolves in the story told by Louise Erdrich. The wolves accept the lives they are given. They live because they live. They don’t get tangled up in envy or regret or resentment or wish for a different life. They embrace the present moment.

In my years of practicing psychotherapy, the biggest lesson I learned, and I keep relearning it, is that we too must embrace the present moment of our feelings. I learned that I could *feel* my feelings. Could it really be that simple? Am I sad? Feel the sadness. Am I angry? Feel the anger. Am I fearful? Feel the fear. I don’t mean that we should yell at someone or pound on the wall when we are angry, or cower and retreat when we feel afraid. What I mean is that the most helpful thing we can do is to stop and sit still and turn our attention inward.

³John Shea, “Walking Each Other Home,” found at http://www.beliefnet.com/story/102/story_10230_1.html

We turn our attention to notice our feelings as they course through our body. Keep breathing. Notice and be present to how the feelings feel. I first learned to do this with the help of a compassionate listener. “Where is the sadness in your body?” she asked. “What does it sound like? What color is it?” And I would close my eyes and look for the sadness in my body, notice its sound and color. By repeating such a practice of awareness I learned that feelings pass through us, and change and move around. I learned to carry my sadness as if I were holding a child by the hand, letting it walk with me, not trying to control it, but neither letting it rule my days.

When we welcome our brokenness and pain into the larger circle of our experience, we open up to the possibility of wholeness. We open a wholeness inside our hearts, because we embrace all of what it means to be alive, all the feelings and experiences of our days. And we open up a wholeness between persons, because we understand that our experience is the common human experience. When we listen or are listened to, we have a chance to feel this connection between us, to know that all of us experience the wheel of human emotions.

I do not mean to minimize the pain of grieving. As I have been preparing to leave Allen Avenue, I have been thinking about the people who have died while I have been your minister. I have been remembering many sad conversations with members who have lost beloved spouses or parents or siblings or children or dear long-time friends.

Thirty years ago, I lost my former partner to an automobile accident. I remember many months of deep sorrow. I remember waking up some mornings in a gray haze, feeling so heavy in my being that getting out of bed was almost too much to manage. I remember sudden spells of weeping, and anger, and feelings of panic when driving at night in the rain. Even so many years later, there are times still when I wish I could call him on the phone, to see the twinkle in his eyes, and ask him what he thinks about the state of the world, and tell him what my life has become. He was my first love.

The threads of connection do not end when death comes. When we lose a loved one, we still carry our love for them in our hearts. We still carry their love for us. When we are touched by death, we grasp the incredible fragility and preciousness of the lives that we live.

Since I have been here, I have participated in over fifty memorial services for beloved members or friends of our church. Each person's name is recorded in our congregational record book, and each year on the Sunday near Halloween, we have remembered these beloved dead. Each death was a painful loss.

On the other side of these losses I experience a tender gratitude. It can be so easy to take for granted the people around us, take for granted the good and ordinary happenings that fill our days. Death reminds us that nothing can be taken for granted. All things are passing. Death always seems to come too soon, like an interruption, a surprise in the middle of our activities. An accident, an illness. And yet, it comes eventually to all of us. When I remember that, I am suddenly mindful of the many blessings that fill my life; I am filled with thanksgiving for the ordinary wonders of my days—especially the people I love and who love me.

Our losses shape who we are as people. I know that my own sense of being a stranger called me into the work of radical hospitality—first as a volunteer in making a welcoming shelter for people who were homeless, and later as a minister, in the work of creating community to offer welcome to spiritual wanderers. When I embrace the life I have been given, I can see how my very wound became my gift and my calling.

I didn't consciously figure that out—my broken edges led me right into the places where that work would unfold in my life. I have been creating communities my whole life. And each time I go to a new place, I also go about seeking out the trees and the lakes and beaches of that place. Would I have cherished them so much if I didn't know the pain of loss?

I think about this as I reflect on the changes and transitions to come this summer. I will leave Allen Avenue, and go on to whatever might be next. There will be many different feelings along the way. Sadness, loss, gratitude, fear, anticipation, curiosity. You will bring a new Minister, and also a new Director of Religious Education, to share their gifts and passions with this beloved community. There will be many different feelings during that process. But wonderful new opportunities will also emerge.

Novelist Toni Cade Bambara once put it—we must play the cards we are dealt.⁴ About twenty-two years ago, I was working as a therapist in private practice, and also working part time in a bookstore. When the bookstore went bankrupt, I lost that job, and I didn't have enough income to keep doing what I was doing. I had to rethink my path. It was in that time of transition that I considered the possibility of becoming a Unitarian Universalist minister. If I hadn't lost my job, I might never have become a minister. When loss comes into our lives, it can open up new doorways. That doesn't mean it doesn't hurt. But if we feel the feelings, and accept the life we are given, we can do what we can with our new situation.

Melvin Woodworth wrote:

Like a river flows life, strong and deep and filled with fast little eddies. Letting go is part of life's definition, and receiving is part of letting go. We could, in security or comfort, cling to each bend in the river, hold on to each boulder along the way. We could shackle ourselves with old conflicts, or bind ourselves with past loves, wanting always to linger in familiar scenes along the way. But the river flows on. And the God of the river sweeps into our view new mysteries and holy places to hold us for a moment, then to see us safely on our way.⁵

I began this reflection asking the question, how can we live with loss in our lives? What helps us to cope? What I found helpful in my own journey I hope will be helpful to you as well. It was helpful to know that every human being shares in this experience of loss. We all carry pain as a part of being human, each in our own way. It was helpful to accept the feelings that are part of each day, to let go of trying to fix everything, and instead merely allow myself to feel the feelings. It was helpful to find people who were willing to walk with me in those dark valleys, who could accept me in my brokenness.

⁴ Toni Cade Bambara, *The Saltaters*

⁵ <http://friendsofsilence.net/quote/2014/10/river-flows-life>

It was also helpful to realize that the wounded places in me created the gifts and the calling that I had to offer to the world. It was helpful to find that on the other side of loss was a deep gratitude for the beauty and the miracle of my life.

I want to close this reflection with a teaching story from the Hindu tradition.

There was a Hindu master who grew tired of his apprentice always complaining. So he told the apprentice to put some salt in a glass of water.

“How does it taste?” he asked.

“Bitter,” said the apprentice.

Next, he asked the young man to take the same amount of salt and put it in the lake. “How does that taste?” he asked.

“Fresh,” remarked the apprentice. “I can’t taste the salt at all.”

At this, the master took the hands of the young man and said, “The pain of life is pure salt; no more, no less. But the amount of bitterness we taste depends on the container we put the pain in. So when you are in pain, the only thing you can do is to enlarge your sense of things. Stop being a glass. Become a lake.”⁶

Closing Words

Deep peace of the running wave to you.

Deep peace of the flowing air to you.

Deep peace of the quiet earth to you.

Deep peace of the shining stars to you.

Deep peace of the infinite peace to you.

As we extinguish the flame of this chalice,
let each of us carry its light into every day of our lives.

⁶ Adapted from Mark Nepo, *The Book of Awakening*, excerpted at www.spiritualityandpractice.com.