

**What I am Learning about Grief**  
Online Sunday Service for May 24, 2020  
Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento

**Story for All Ages**—*The Invisible String* by Patrice Karst

**Reading** – [“What I’m Learning about Grief” –a crowdsourced poem from NPR](#)

**Musical Tribute** for Memorial Day– “Taps”

Gordon Gerwig, trumpet; Ann Haas, French horn; Keith Atwater, trombone

**Personal Reflection**—Worship Associate Lindsay Mitchell

Grief is the mental suffering or distress over an affliction, loss or even a regret. Bearing this in mind, I would like to talk to you about one of the most meaningful conversations I’ve had with a close friend about our fathers, their life choices, and how that all shines through in us as their daughters.

My father, David, was never a soldier. Though he was a young man at the time, he did not fight in the Vietnam War. He dodged the draft and spent about four years backpacking and doing odd jobs around Europe and, later, India. He was sort of the stereotypical "hippie" with his drug experimentation, free spirit, and sense of adventure. During his time in India, he got very sick with dysentery. The story goes that a wealthy local housed him in his large, Indian mansion, and nursed him back to health. My father was an extremely talented, self-taught musician and an incredible poet. So, when he ran out of money during his travels, he would use his musical skills to play a handmade bamboo flute, or borrow a guitar to play on the street for coins.

As a child, I relished his stories and songs from that time in his twenties. We would only see him on the weekends, and I have vivid memories of him driving my siblings and me around in the hot summer, still in our swimsuits coming from the pool. A cigarette would be held out the window between his fingers, a rum and coke in the console. We’d be listening to Motown, The Moody Blues, or even random Indian music. He would teach us how to say food ingredients in German, adjectives in Spanish, polite phrases in French, a couple words in Hindi- things he had learned during his travels. I grew up thinking, “travel, adventure, taking chances, a little bit of danger, see how far you can go and survive. Man, this is how you LIVE”. When he suddenly died in his mid-forties, I was in seventh grade. So, all of my memories of my father are on a short, stuttering, repeating loop. Despite this brief time together, my father did have a strong impact on who I became long after he died. He instilled in me a strong curiosity and appreciation for other cultures and languages. His influence is directly related to my chosen profession as a world language teacher as well as my wanderlust.

Now, I would like to tell you about my close friend’s side of the conversation. Her father did fight in the Vietnam War. He sustained some injuries and still suffers from PTSD. His sacrifice caused him afflictions that affect his home life, work life and social life to this day. I think about what he, and veterans like him, lost by patriotically answering the call of duty to fight in a war on the other side of the world. We know that many who came back home had lost their chance at a normal early adulthood. He doesn’t talk much about that time of his youth, he doesn’t want to share with his children the things he saw and did in his twenties. I think about what it might have been like to grow up as his daughter, having to be mindful about the wrong stimuli they might encounter at a public event, about the insomnia and trauma that shadowed

their day to day life. My friend earned her PhD in psychology and now works with veterans who suffer from their trauma. Her lifelong experience of being frequently tuned into her father's well-being and what might trigger him is now a part of her professional career.

Between both of our stories about our fathers, there is plenty of grief. But it is not for me to say which kind is worse: bereavement or trauma, regret or affliction, a shorter life lived the way you want to, or a longer life forever impacted by decisions out of your control. Grief takes many forms. When I lost my father, I also lost chunks of hair and had stress-induced hives for nearly a year. I don't have very clear memories of a lot of my seventh or eighth grade year. It has been nearly 25 years since then, and I now see that during that time of loss, I gained resilience, gratitude, and empathy far beyond my years. Time has healed my grief, but I cling to that short, repeating loop of memories of my father like the treasure that it is.

### **Minister's Homily—Rev. Dr. Roger Jones**

In poetry and scripture, a lamentation is an expression of pain, sorrow and grief. It includes weeping, shouting, crying out to God and calling out to our fellow human beings. Lamentation is not the way that we *get rid of* loss or harm or sorrow. The harm is done; the loss is felt. Lamentation is a way people *navigate through* grief and sorrow. We don't get rid of it, we journey through it. And we start the journey by naming our grief. In the Jewish Bible there's a whole book entitled Lamentations. The originates from and refers to a devastating loss in 586 BCE, the loss of a city and the end of a kingdom. It is ancient history, for sure. But lamentation is a word and an action that still has plenty of work in our own time.

By now the United States has lost well over 100,000 people to the pandemic. The world as a whole has lost about 350,000 people.

As with massive losses in a war, the statistics of this crisis can be overwhelming. We can forget that each number counted is really a name. Each name was a person with gifts and flaws, a person from a family and a community. The death of each person tears a hole in the fabric of life in which that person was held. This is loss and grief in their most familiar form. In these times of actual physical separation, the grieving process has been compounded.

For example, most of the people who recently have lost loved ones to death *by any cause* have not been able to gather for a memorial services or funeral, not to mention the reception following. On the radio I heard an interview with a funeral director in a town in South Carolina. He expressed pain at his inability now to put an arm around a bereaved family member, or to give them a shoulder to cry on. He can't hold services. To be sure, we've learned that some grieving people have been creative and are gathering online for memorial services. Others have decided to wait out the pandemic. Nevertheless, for the time being, we have limited access now to physical affection as a source of comfort. This loss in itself is something to grieve.

Many people who die of Covid-19 in the hospital go through their last moments without the physical presence of those whom they know the best. I'm sure it's awful. And for the surviving ones to be stymied in their urge to see, touch, and comfort a loved one seems just as unbearable. Thank goodness, at least, there are telephones and computers and the internet. And of course, we can be grateful for those providers of medical and spiritual care whose compassion and efforts will ensure that a patient is not alone when they are near the end.

Many stories of loss and grief are so huge, we can feel shy to recognize the more nuanced ways that grief is hitting us. When many others are losing *people*, it can feel unfair to speak about the losses we're going through. Yet no kind of grief goes away by ignoring it. With any kind of loss, it's only by recognizing it that we grieve the loss, that we go through the grief.

Since the middle of March, we have seen schedules overturned, plans disrupted, and stresses multiplied for so many people. People have given up travel plans, potluck dinners, and fundraising banquets. Families have missed out on birthday and anniversary parties, housewarming parties, commencement ceremonies, athletic team practices and competitions and speech or musical performances. Children and youth have lost out on time together in the classroom, in the gym, or on the playground. For very young people, losses like these must be shocking and unfair. Indeed, they *are* unfair. They are a cause for grieving.

Families with children at home have been juggling childcare, education, and working, whether doing their jobs at home or out in public. The loss of down time, personal space, rest, and enough hours in the day is aggravating. Of course, many of the parents are part of the almost 40 million people now out of work. All of these are cause for grieving.

Yesterday afternoon Rev. Lucy and I were talking on the phone about this service, among other things. At the end, I said, “See you tomorrow!” And in my mind, as I said that I pictured us together on the platform in the sanctuary, and all of you sitting out there. Then in a split second I realized: *No—we’ll be in separate places!*

Sometime every week, in fact, I catch myself imagining that I will see you all in person. Then I say, “Oh! I guess not yet.” I won’t get to see everyone in the same space. I won’t get to see children, youth, or adults from head to toe in physical form, only their faces in the frame of my computer screen. It’s weird, but in the same instant I have both a recognition of this reality and the sting of disbelief: *Oh! Is this really happening?* That’s how grief works.

I can be doing something at home like yardwork or the laundry, and life seems normal, ordinary. Then it hits me. Life hasn’t been ordinary for over two months. Even if it’s not a sharp jab or a steady pain, grief can emerge as a surprise.

I have missed the activities that gave texture to my days and rhythm to my weeks. The losses may be temporary but for now they are real, and I’m grieving. Walking by a coffee house or driving by a restaurant, I feel sad. I know I can order food for delivery or pick up a coffee outside. But I miss the place--the place with people in it. Thanks to innovative arts organizations, we now can watch a play, concert or opera streaming online. We can send money to support the artists. Great--but I miss the energy of people crowding a lobby. I miss the buzz of conversations at intermission.

For the people who run those places, or work in them, no doubt the grief and worry are heavy. I hope it’s a source of comfort for them to know we miss them. I hope our donations and our takeout purchases not only help them financially but give them encouragement.

Here’s another kind of grief. This global epidemic has caused some of us in this country to lose our sense of *exemption*. That is, we are not exempt from the agonies with which human beings around the world are all too familiar. Deadly epidemics happen “over there,” we may have thought. Or, epidemics happen to groups other than the ones I’m part of. Perhaps that’s where my own moments of denial or disbelief come from when ordinary life is upended. As a white, male American person of privilege—the loss of my sense of exemption is an unwelcome surprise.

Perhaps that is the motivation behind some of the people who defy the need for social distancing and those who claim a personal right not to wear a mask in public. Maybe some of them don’t want to lose their sense of exemption from the danger we’re all facing. While their urges may be understandable, their lack of caution is frightening. Their lack of awareness or care for the impact of their actions on everyone else is upsetting. I’m not sure if I feel more anger than fear about this, but grief can hold both anger and fear.

Earlier I mentioned the act of lamentation and the book of Lamentations in the Bible. In Hebrew, the root of the word for lamentation means “how.” I don’t know for sure, but perhaps that root word hints at the question “How could this happen *to us*?” Maybe it conveys the more general question, the universal question, of “How could this happen at all?” And then, while crying out in grief, another question emerges, “How do we navigate our lives now? How do we go forward?”

Times of suffering call for people to come together for comfort. In these times, doing that in person would often be risky and unwise. Yet we can still reach out to reassure one another that we care. We can reach out with our voices on the phone, our presence online, and our words written on paper and sent in the U.S. Mail. We can reach out with a smile onscreen, a wave across the street, or the gesture of a hug from at least six feet away if we’re in the outside air. If our mouth is covered with a mask, and we smile, people can still see the smile in our eyes.

The story we heard earlier is called *The Invisible String*. It is a reminder of our connections to those we care about and appreciate, no matter the stresses or losses we experience. All of us are separated physically from so many we care about—some by death, and many by this extended ordeal of time. Yet the connections that we are missing do, in fact, remain in our hearts and souls. Indeed, this is why grief hurts: because our connections are real and are deep inside the heart. Grief is a validation of our connections.

Grieving well has to do with appreciating what we’ve received from others—and missing it. Grief is the longing to keep on giving, receiving and sharing, to keep on caring and connecting. The work of grief is the affirmation of the gifts of life and it’s the commitment to find a way to keep sharing the gifts of life.

Whatever the reasons might be for your journey of grieving, may you be blessed on the journey. May you honor your grieving as you remember whom or what you have lost.

And in the midst of your journey, may you remember that you are held in love. All of us are. We are held by a love that won’t let us go. We are held by the love that sees us through the journey of grief. And we are held always, by one another, by invisible connections of the heart.

So may it be. Amen.