

Death, Loss, and Other Disappointments: Grief and Vulnerability

Rev. Dr. Roger Jones, preaching
Sunday, August 14, 2022
Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento

Hymns: #1008, When Our Heart Is in a Holy Place; #1031, (May I Be) Filled with Loving Kindness; Life Calls Us On (Shelton/Gibbons). Instrumentals: Piano: Solace (Joplin); Intermezzo, B flat minor, Op.117, No.2 (Brahms); Come to the Meadow (Kellaway), with cello.

Reading:

For the Anniversary of My Death
by W.S. Merwin

Every year without knowing it I have passed the day
When the last fires will wave to me
And the silence will set out
Tireless traveler
Like the beam of a lightless star

Then I will no longer
Find myself in life as in a strange garment
Surprised at the earth
And the love of one woman
And the shamelessness of men
As today writing after three days of rain
Hearing the wren sing and the falling cease
And bowing not knowing to what

Personal reflection by Celia (printed after sermon)

Sermon

Loss and grief are primary human experiences—they are inevitable for everyone. Yet in spite of how familiar such experiences may be for us, we seem to resist going through them. Loss and grief are something we all share, yet we are not always present or patient with one another as we grieve. This is because grief makes us vulnerable. Grief and loss teach us that we have a lot less control than we like to think. David Richo is a Buddhist writer and marriage and family therapist. In his book *Five True Things*, he says that we suffer so much because we try to control our lives rather than seeing our lives clearly:

Control is one of our favorite ways of running [away] from life as it is. Control is an illusion to deeply engrained that we think we can let go of control simply by wanting to. We do not let go of control [he says]; we let go of the *belief* that we *have* control.ⁱ

Loss of any kind is not only disappointing, sad, or painful—it exposes our vulnerability, exposes our lack of control over life. My mother died when I was 30, after a long decline from emphysema. Though her passing wasn't a shock, it was a big loss. Where she had been present in my life, I felt an absence. Two years after her death I was back home visiting central Indiana. One Sunday I visited All Souls Unitarian Church in Indianapolis. (I was not yet a minister at the time.) Larry McGinty was their interim minister. I don't remember the sermon. Yet in their library at coffee hour, I found an article he had written for a UU publication. It was about grief. In it he captured some of what I had gone through in the year or two since my mother's death.

He wrote that memories can pop up at odd moments, not merely at specific dates on the calendar or when visiting a familiar place. Sadness can intrude on our lives when it seems quite unwelcome. Moreover, he wrote, in the months following a loss, we who grieve can become absent-minded and even accident-prone. Tasks that we usually handle with ease become stressful. We sometimes react with words or actions we might later regret; we can be impulsive. Larry wrote that if you are in the wake of a loss, you might feel an urge to make an abrupt change, like moving to a new state, getting a divorce, quitting your job, or changing careers. His advice: Please give yourself a year to wait, and then come back to that idea. It was a great relief to see my experience validated as typical, as natural. A few years later, when I read of Larry's death, I said a prayer of thanks to him for helping me in that brief article. That was 30 years ago.

Last month, I lost one of my oldest friends. In 1988, Charlie Kast was the minister of the Second Unitarian Church when I moved to Chicago. As a young adult, my participation in that congregation and Charlie's ministry in particular were foundational experiences for me. In addition to gaining a joyful sense of community, in those years I began to gain a sense of direction and purpose in my life.

Though we differed in personality and in style, the way he served as a minister and lived as a spiritual person shaped who I became. It shaped many others too. For example, Charlie showed us how to explore our own attitudes about money, its role in our lives and how we use it with regard to our values. Charlie was frugal, but he was deeply generous. He was frank about his own monetary commitments to the church. I learned more about stewardship in that congregation than I learned in seminary. Another example: He loved kids and youth, and he cared about the plight of children in this country. He became a foster parent. Over nine years, more than 100 kids came through his apartment. Many of them showed up at our church, where they were welcomed and included. Charlie's joy in mentoring and his passion for justice would provoke my later involvement as a volunteer advocate for kids and youth as well as my life as a minister to them.

Charlie had a stroke last April and he didn't get better. In July while I was in North Carolina, I visited his nursing home near Chapel Hill, where he had served his last ministry and retired. I told him what I appreciated about him. We reminisced about our days in Chicago. I updated him on my life here. Though he had some confusion and spoke slowly, he made sure I knew about the season record of the Sacramento Kings basketball team—near the bottom. Charlie told me he had requested hospice care and was preparing to die. "I will die happy," he said. *Why is that?* I asked him. He said: "Ten years ago, I realized that I had achieved my life's purpose and I would be ready for death."

I asked what that purpose was. He said: "To be the fullest expression of Charlie as possible, given genetics, environment, and other conditions. And to make the world a better

place.” His words resonated with all of the sermons I’d ever heard him give. After a long visit, I said *I love you*. He asked me for a hug. We said goodbye. He died 10 days later, at age 81. At every stage of his life, his outlook and his practice gave him an ability to let go of expectations, accept the reality of loss, grieve disappointments, and move into life again. Now he has let go for one final time.

After I came home from North Carolina, I felt sad, but I didn’t think the grief was deep or heavy. In spite of all I’d learned, I had the illusion that grieving this loss would be straightforward, not surprising. But a few weeks later I began waking up anxious, and extra early. My to-do list has always been long, but this time I’d feel a jolt when I’d think of one more thing I have to add to it, or something I’d forgotten to do. Also, the absent-minded thing: It is normal for me to be absent-minded, but last Thursday morning takes the cake. I drove to church, got out of the car, and carried my lunch bag into my office. However, I couldn’t find my backpack. It holds my computer as well as my notebook, so I needed it for working. Not in the trunk, not on the seats of the car. As I drove back home, I moaned about the time and the gasoline I was wasting. *Ugh*. I pulled up at the curb next to my house. The sunlight shined inside the car, landing on the passenger side. It illuminated the gray and black backpack--on the floor. It had been there the whole time. This is when I realized that perhaps the abnormal feelings of these days are part of the normal process of grieving. Just because the journey of grieving becomes familiar doesn’t mean it gets easier.

One of the most unhelpful sentences to say to a grieving person is: *Isn’t it time for you to get over this?* Sometimes we say this to ourselves. According to therapist and writer Leanne Campbell, we don’t get over it, we move through it. We respect our grieving. We feel it. We can move through challenging emotions with courage, compassion, patience, and help. She writes that in the early stages of grieving, it’s a “process of alternating [feelings of] protest and [feelings of] despair.”ⁱⁱ It’s a natural process, but not a pleasant one.

We need to respect our grieving, not hide it or suppress it. If we have difficulty in resuming normal activities, or in finding any joy or purpose for an extended period of time, we may need to seek professional help. But whether we need that or not, we all need companions in grieving. We need to be open to one another’s odd but natural experiences, whether we participate in ordinary, 1 to 1 conversations or in a group setting. This congregation hosted a grief support group a few years ago, facilitated by a chaplain from a local hospice. Now we are planning to offer our own grief support group at UUSS, planned for several weeks in the spring.

There are so many losses that we may grieve: the death of people who are close to us or the end of a relationship. People grieve the loss of a pet and the loss of a home, whether from eviction or financial devastation, or from a natural disaster. I have a friend in his 90s who has moved into a lovely continuing-care facility in another state. He likes it, but he’s grieving the sale of his home and most of his possessions. A few years ago, he gave up his car. He grieved that as well. His grief is real, but so is his practice to accept life as it is, to keep an open heart, and give thanks for every day.

As human beings get older, most of us lose energy, physical ability, and good health. Things can go wrong, and they will. Some people face a loss or decline in function earlier, but it *is* part of the aging process. Ever since I was young, people said I had “an old soul.” What I now say is: “I have an old soul, and now my body is catching up with it.”

Grief is not optional, it is natural. Problems arise when we suppress our feelings of grief, deny it, or fail to notice it. Grieving is what happens to us. Mourning is different. Mourning is the way we choose to recognize, ritualize, or otherwise honor the loss. David Richo has written that grieving and mourning are the work we do to accept the reality of a loss. Tears are the body's way of saying *Yes, this happened*. Memories and storytelling are the soul's way of saying *Yes* to what we had and what we lost, and of learning to live with a sense of absence.

I talked about my loss of Charlie to a counselor, who is my spiritual director. She asked me if I could identify an image or a feeling. *Well, I'm embarrassed to be using a cliché*, I said, *but it feels as if one of my limbs is missing*. She asked if I might think of ways to ritualize this loss. I said: *Well, I can try to pay attention to the times when I am doing things that reflect what I learned from Charlie. I could honor him through my actions*.

She added that having a tangible way to mark the loss and honor the relationship could be helpful. For example, she said, some people create altars in their home for a time. *I never do stuff like that*, I said. However, on my last visit with Charlie, he said he wanted his friends to go to his apartment and take whatever we wanted of his things. So I did that. I took a few snapshots from his earlier life. I took his coffee mug of the Chicago Cubs baseball team and some art and a hoodie. And I brought home *this*, a beaten-up leather binder where he carried his sermons. I still have birthday cards and Christmas letters he had sent me, and a church directory from our Chicago days. So I do plan to build an altar on a table at my house. Whether it's up for only a few days or a few weeks, when I look at it, I will have a place and a moment where I can remember him and express my gratitude. Another thing I don't usually do is write letters to people who have died. Yet, based on the suggestion of a friend, I've begun writing to Charlie. I've had two sittings of an hour each, and hope to get back to it.

It can be tempting to minimize a loss and to think we shouldn't be having the emotions we do. It's easy to note that other people around the world are living and dying and losing people in much more desperate situations. Yet that reality does not negate or diminish our experience of loss and grief. It is a natural part of life.

David Richo says: "Everything falls apart in time." Just as we all grieve the loss of others, we can feel sad or scared when we recognize our own mortality. It's okay to grieve that fact, whether we are approaching the end of life or hoping we have a lot more years. Honest grief honors the gift of life. In his poem "For the Anniversary of My Death," W.S. Merwin writes: "Every year without knowing it I have passed the day/ When the last fires will wave to me/ And the silence will set out." The poet reflects on this reality. He doesn't know when it will be. He's uncertain about what comes later. As long as he's alive, however, he commits to noticing the ordinary features of life. He continues "bowing not knowing to what."

The work of grieving is the practice of noticing what is real for us: feelings, emotions, images, impulses. We notice our lack of control, and we honor our vulnerability. The role of serving as companions in mourning calls for a practice of respecting one another's ways of grieving. We respect the real emotions. Both our own grieving and our solidarity with others call for the practice of keeping an open heart. This, I think, is the key to living deeply at any time: trying to keep an open heart.

Death is mysterious and powerful. So is life. Life is a miracle and a blessing. Let us bow to life. Let us keep an open heart. Let us notice each day that we are given to live. Let us bow to it, in honor and in thanks. So may it be. Amen.

ⁱ David Richo, *Five True Things: A Little Book for Embracing Life's Big Challenges* (Shambhala, 2019). davericho.com

ⁱⁱ Leanne Campbell, "Moving through Grief," *Psychotherapy Networker*, July/August 2022, p. 41.

<https://www.psychologynetworker.org/magazine/article/2670/moving-through-grief>