

Navigating the Waters of Grief and Loss

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First Parish in Brookline

After I had finalized the order of service this week, it occurred to me that I should have called this sermon: “Navigating the Waters of *Change*.” Because that’s what we’re *really* talking about today. Whether it’s the death of a beloved family member, friend, or pet; a move to a new home or town; loss of health or ability; even moving to a new grade in school—change is hard. “Change is certain,” says Heraclitus of Ephesus in our blessing for the teachers this morning, “we can *never step twice* into the same stream.” Change is the one thing in life we can count on. And so it is, here, in this place; in addition to the many life changes you may have experienced in past years, this congregation has changed and your minister is not the same.

To just thoroughly overuse this metaphor...we are all swimming in the same water, some of us more easily and happily than others, and over the past seven years, here at First Parish in Brookline, those waters have been stirred up repeatedly. For those of you who are new, you might be wondering right now, as my grandson would say “What the *heck?*” I want to reassure you—when I was called to be the settled minister of First Parish this past May, it was a joyous occasion for me and for the majority of the congregation who were there. I am thrilled to be here now, this is exactly the kind of call I had hoped for and, let me be clear, I have no plans to go anywhere. This may be my one and only ministry and I am fine with that.

I know my job here is to love you and be present for you, in good times and in hard ones, just as fully and as long as I am able. As my mentor said to me this week, with her arms thrown open: “I am all yours!” At the same time, it needs to be acknowledged that First Parish went through seven years, at least, of transition, ever since Rev. Martha Niebanck announced her retirement in 2011. The loss of your beloved Rev. Martha was followed a few years later by Rev. Dr. Jim Sherblom’s leaving—many of you were deeply affected by that loss. Then, after some turbulent times, Rev. Dr. Maria Cristina Vlassidis Burgoa was called to another pulpit and yet another painful goodbye was said. Finally, this Spring, after two and a half years of a healing and impactful ministry, you said goodbye to Rev. Rebecca Bryan, whom you *knew* from the start was an interim, you *knew* you could not keep her, and yet that did not make that loss any easier. And I’m here to say, “My people, that is a LOT of transition, a LOT of loss.” I get it. It’s hard. And it’s complicated. We don’t all feel the same way, but there are painful feelings and those deserve to be acknowledged. In the midst of last Sunday’s celebration and the joy of new beginnings, I felt your pain, I heard the undertones of grieving, not just for Rev. Rebecca’s loss, but for all the losses, all the changes of the past months and years. Many of your personal losses were significant—there was death and serious illness, divorce, and severed ties. All of it hurts; all of it matters. And all of it belongs right here. And, let me say it again, I am here for you—for all of it, not just the happy times, though I hope

we will have *lots* of those, but for all of the pain and the losses, even ones that stretch back over years.

On some level, we all understand that every loss we experience reminds us of every loss we've ever had. As poet Dylan Thomas puts it: "After the first death there is no other." Every time another loss or change happens, they can trigger feelings that might surprise you with their depth; our hearts reach back to continue to try to heal from past hurts. The body/mind is actually very smart. And we need to move and change with the grieving process, in order to heal and keep growing. Buddhist meditation teacher, Tara Brach, has this to say: "Sadness is adaptive, it's intelligent. When we open to grief it leads us to the love that's undying. The brain can form intentional pathways of reconnecting, if we only allow it.

Severing our longing and disconnecting often leads to depression; it shuts down connection to our frontal cortex, which limits access to empathy, connection, compassion, mindfulness, and humor. That's important, let me just say that again: *Severing our longing and disconnecting...shuts down connection to our frontal cortex, which limits access to empathy, connection, compassion, mindfulness, and humor.* We need access to *all* of our emotions to survive loss; not just to survive, but to thrive.

Young people are often some of our best teachers, especially about owning our true feelings. I think of my granddaughter Bennett, who is a twin. After she was born and for weeks thereafter, Bennett had times that she cried inconsolably, even angrily. Her mother, my daughter, Amy, would look at Bennett's peaceful and contented brother, mystified, with tears of frustration in her own eyes. I was lucky enough to spend a couple of weeks with them early on and, as I held Bennett all I could think was "Yes, poor little babe, you're right. They pulled you from that nice warm, watery, familiar place inside your mom into a cold, blindingly bright, hospital room, where you were forced to breathe air, wrapped in cloth, and bombarded by loud sounds. No wonder you're angry and crying all the time—who wouldn't be?!" It's amazing that we ever stop crying over the trauma of just being born!

Kahlil Gibran tells us: "Your pain is the breaking of the shell that encloses your understanding. Even as the stone of the fruit must break, that its heart may stand in the sun, so must you know pain." Every life must know the pain of loss and change; every one of us, from our earliest years, experiences grief, but that doesn't make it any easier. One more story about my daughter Amy. Amy always loved school; she was the one who never looked back as I left her at the kindergarten door. She adored her kindergarten teacher and, as it happened, her assistant kindergarten teacher became her first-grade teacher. In spite of that, the first week of school, Amy cried every night at bedtime, saying she "wanted to go back to kindergarten." Her grief and loss were palpable and she would not be consoled. Finally, one morning she announced happily: "It's okay. I've decided that I'm going to grow up and be a kindergarten teacher and then I can stay in kindergarten forever!" If only all of us could resolve our grief so simply. And, by the way, she works in television now, quite different from kindergarten!

We all need to find ways to cope with grief and loss. Those waters are tricky, full of ripples and waves, whirlpools and eddies. The stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance may be familiar in theory, but when we're in the middle of a process that, let's be honest, doesn't always proceed in a linear fashion, we can feel swamped and confused, the ground under us simply shaking. There is, quite simply, no timeline for grieving. No one can tell us when we're done or that we should be done. Many of us learned this summer about the mother killer whale, known as Tahlequah, in the waters of the Pacific Northwest, who carried her dead calf for 17 days, pushing the corpse through the water or carrying it on her forehead, while the pod surrounded her; many of them taking turns, as she tired. Tahlequah was doing the work of grieving in her own time, in her own way, with the support of her community. Many species of animals have this kind of intelligence; as a matter of fact animals may be more in tune with the grieving process than many humans. Many of us have seen pets exhibit this kind of behavior. I had a cat who disappeared for days, after her beloved dog companion died. It is heartbreaking, and yet it is the most natural thing in the world. For some of us, tears flow easily, others of us depend on familiar routines, close relationships, soothing music or readings. Still others turn to food for comfort and connection.

About a year ago I attended the funeral of my dear friend Dolly at her church in Everett, Zion Baptist. I had been there many times, so I knew what to expect—full-on Baptist praise worship, with amazing singing, powerful preaching, choruses of Amens, and open grieving. It's a far cry from my Episcopal or UU experience, and I embrace that; loud and joy-filled—it was exactly what Dolly wanted. After the service, about a hundred of us crowded into the basement kitchen common room for a lunch with all the Southern fixings, complete with laughter and story-telling. I said to one of the deacons, "Wow, this is quite a spread!" And he answered, sweeping his hand over the loaded buffet table: "*This* is how *much* this church loved Miss Dolly." Food had sealed our healing, love, and connection with Dolly. Hours later, when we left, laden with leftovers pressed on us by the church ladies, we had run the gamut from joy to deep sorrow to laughter and remembrance—we had grieved well, there were no regrets.

We are entering the season of Yom Kippur and Ashura, the Jewish and Shia Muslim observances of atonement, repentance, and mourning. For both observant Jews and Shia Muslims these days are often marked by fasting and prayer; in some traditions there is rending of clothing, even self-flagellation. For those who practice them, these traditions bring peace and healing. For some they are even transformative of both personal and collective grief. Worshippers who fully embrace these rituals often say they are healed or changed. It makes me think of the Stanley Kunick poem that ends:

Though I lack the art
to decipher it,
no doubt the next chapter
in my book of transformations
is already written.
I am not done with my changes.

In times of grief and loss, humor has always been a strong coping mechanism in my father's family. Every memorial service, especially the reception afterward, is filled with storytelling, laughter and even maudlin joke-telling. Here's one I'll share with you:

A man and his wife from Michigan decide to vacation in Florida at the same hotel where they had spent their honeymoon. Because of work schedules, he goes ahead by one day and when he gets there, he decides to send her an email. But he inadvertently leaves off one letter of the email address. In Texas, a widow steps away from her husband's memorial service reception and decides to quickly check her email. Her son finds her, fainted on the floor of her room, and he reads the message on the computer screen. The subject line says: "To My Dear Wife. I arrived yesterday and everything is just as we expected it to be. They've upgraded the rooms, so we can send email to our loved ones now. Everything is prepared for your arrival tomorrow. P.S. It's awfully hot down here!"

Okay, back to seriousness... It strikes me that grief doesn't necessarily need a lot of words. I came across a website this week: "Six Word Stories About Grief." There were so many moving examples, so many powerful stories that could be told in just six words, that I thought I'd give it a try. It was a lot harder than you might think, but here is mine:

Precious brother, decades later, still unforgotten.

I cried while I crafted that six-word elegy; I urge you to give it a try if words are a pathway for your healing, as they have been for mine. Losses may take many years to heal; some may never fully heal. Still, we have to learn to let go in small steps, because the healing is good for us, because it opens us up to more love and more connection. May Sarton says it so beautifully:

"If I can take the dark with open eyes
And call it seasonal, not harsh or strange
(For love itself may need a time of sleep),
And, treelike, stand unmoved before the change,
Lose what I lose to keep what I can keep,
The strong root still alive under the snow,
Love will endure—if I can let you go."

It is never a mistake to have loved deeply, to have truly connected, to have opened our hearts and our soul and spirits, only to have lost that person, place, or thing. Loving, opening up our hearts, being that vulnerable, is good for us, it is healthy. Grieving is healthy, too. And, here in this place, we have one more thing, one more very important aspect of healing. We have each other. Let us turn, in our grief, to each other.

I am here for you, of course. I hope that goes without saying. We also have a wonderful team of Pastoral Care Associates; could I ask those of you who are here to stand, please? They are also listed in your order of service and on our website. Thank you. And, again, we have each other. Every one of us has experienced grief, pain, loss; none of us has

escaped. I'm going to ask you to do something right now that might feel a bit awkward, but I think we can handle it! Turn to your neighbor, first on one side and then on the other, and say "I am here for you, if you need me." We are, indeed, here for each other. In fact, that's one of the main reasons we come here each week, many of us *several times* a week.

My dear friends, let us love and be present for ourselves and for each other, to the best of our ability every day. Let us be open to loving and losing; be vulnerable in our pain. If we make that our aspiration, our intention, the world, which is so filled with all kinds of grief, is bound to be a better, more peaceful and loving place. May it be so. Amen.