

Grief into Gratitude

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Do you remember the story of how the Buddha first began his spiritual journey? The historical person we know as the Buddha was born as Siddhartha Gautama, a prince of a small kingdom occupying territories on the border of Nepal and India. As the story is told, at the time of Siddhartha's birth, wise men predicted he was to become either a powerful emperor or a gifted religious leader. His parents, the King and Queen, were more compelled by the wealth and status in their son's future than his potential towards a life of poverty as a spiritual leader. They decided to raise Siddhartha as an emperor would be raised. The King vowed that his son the prince would only experience the pleasure and delights of the worlds, distancing his young son from the harsh elements of existence that might invoke curiosity and religious questioning. His father built three palaces for Siddhartha for each of the seasons and surrounded him with only the most vivacious and youthful attendants and dancers. Lavish spreads of food were always available, luxury abounded, and his all of needs were met.

If the King had his way, his young son would have never left the sheltered confines of the palace. As Siddhartha grew, however, he became inquisitive about the world and became eager to explore. So Siddhartha's father agreed, but before he would allow his son to enter the world, he vowed to control his every experience of it. The King had Siddhartha's chariot route carefully planned to encounter only the most affluent neighborhoods, with young, happy people to greet him with flowers and incense. All hungry, homeless, ill, or aging people were hidden away in houses where Siddhartha could not detect their suffering.

As you can imagine, this plan was extremely hard to keep up with! Can you imagine a daily ride through New York City as such? Siddhartha loved to ride and each day would grow more and more curious of other parts of the city off the beaten path of his route.

One day, as the story is told, Siddartha encountered four heavenly messengers on his chariot ride. The first was an older man, toothless and balding, with little eyesight. Siddartha asked his charioteer Channa to explain what happened to this man, and whether it was universal. He then learned for the first time of the inevitability of the aging process in human life. The second messenger he encountered was a person in great pain from an incurable disease.

Again, Siddartha asked Channa to explain what was happening to this person, and he then learned for the first time that pain and suffering belong to the human condition.

He then encountered a funeral procession, where he saw both the body of the person who had died, and those who were mourning his loss. He again asked Channa to explain what was happening, and then learned for the first time of the reality of death and the process of grief that follows a loss.

The last messenger he encountered was a monk, who had set himself apart from the world to seek liberation. As the first religious person he had encountered in his lifetime, the monk caused Siddartha to wonder about his own calling in the world.

Siddartha was frightened and curious about these visitors. At 29, he had never encountered sickness, old age, and death. He knew only his sheltered life, with the comforts of pleasure. Repulsed, but intrigued by these teacher-messengers, Siddartha renounced his sheltered life and raised the key spiritual question that would call him to a religious life: “How can life be happy and joyful if we suffer and must die?” This central question fueled Siddartha’s quest to learn about the nature of life and death, to test his body and mind, and to teach others the wisdom he gained from his experiences.

Today, we still struggle just as mightily as Siddartha did with this question of living joyfully in the face of suffering and death. I tell this story this morning to invite us into reflection about our own journeys around loss. While this warm morning may seem an unlikely candidate for a time to delve into such territory, as we enjoy life’s pleasures of summer it is as good of a time as any to attend to this core religious question in our lives.

Each time I visit this story, I find resonance with the experience of this young man as his life is forever changed by his encounters with the four messengers. I wonder if you might be able to identify as well:

Can you remember a time when you felt like young Siddhartha, experiencing the messengers of life's suffering for the first time?

Or perhaps, for you parents in the congregation, can you identify with the King and Queen, as you try to protect the innocence of your children from the world's decay and human suffering?

Or maybe can you see yourself in the charioteer, who with some reservation bursts Siddhartha's bubble of pleasure and delight with the news of life's harsh reality?

Or are you, perhaps reluctantly, a messenger yourself, suffering, grieving, or learning to live with loss? Do you have wisdom to share and are you helping others on their journeys?

On our journeys with suffering and loss, we are constantly shifting and changing perspectives. Most of us will inhabit the majority of these vantage points in our lives. Your wise minister the Rev. Forrest Church once said, "Religion is our human response to the dual reality of being alive and having to die.¹" As much as we think we know about how to cope with that dual reality, at each moment in our life there is a new response and new, often unexpected lesson to learn. Religious community helps us to struggle together to respond. In addition to the insights of the world's religions, science, literature, psychology and history, each person's experience adds to a deeper understanding of the mysteries of life and death.

At All Souls, you are no strangers to the experience of loss. One particularly great loss unites this congregation in shared experience. This upcoming September marks the two-year anniversary of the death of your beloved minister of thirty years Rev. Forrest Church. Throughout his last years of life, Forrest was generous enough to be one of Siddhartha's messengers, sharing his wisdom with you. He preached and wrote about his

¹ Church, Forrest. *Love and Death: My Journey Through the Valley of the Shadow*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2008.

experience in ministry of being a witness to suffering and loss. He then included you the congregation as a witness to his own suffering as he articulated with great vulnerability and emotional honesty the intricacies of his journey with cancer. I can imagine how difficult this was for many of you. Some of you are new members since Forrest's death and only know the memories and the legacy that endures at All Souls. Some of you are visiting this morning, and perhaps learning of this legacy for the first time.

All of us, at every age, experiences loss, whether it is a major loss such as that of a beloved minister or loved one, a work opportunity, a home or a treasured relationship. There are vital losses to our health or well-being that impact our essential identity and our core self. All of us are impacted by the heavy losses we hear about in the news each day, globally in Norway, Iraq and Syria and right here in our city. We live with the impact of the tragedy of September 11th on our lives, and will soon mark the 10 year anniversary as a congregation on our opening Sunday together. Some of us inherit histories of loss from our culture and families that continue to impact our lives, such as the trauma of war, slavery or the Holocaust.

As a new minister entering into relationship with All Souls, I want to begin by honoring the complexities of your journeys with loss. I want to your know your stories and to become a partner with ministry and pastoral associates team on that journey with you. In Unitarian Universalism, even as ministers, we don't pretend to have all of the answers. Ours is not a faith that offers certainty about what lies beyond our experience of this life. We practice a memorial service tradition to honor those who have died, where we draw people together to remember their gifts in poetry, song and story. To remember is to literally re-member, to continue to connect the person's life to membership in our family, circle of friends and community, where their love will on live eternally and their gifts expressed through our lives.

Even if we can't with certainty know what lies beyond this life, we can provide love and comfort in times of sorrow as we grow together. We can share our burdens and offer hope to one another to help us respond together. To experience a loss is to enter into the process of grief, a dynamic and often painfully consuming emotional, physical and spiritual experience that can eventually lead to healing and recovery. Dr. John Schneider, grief counselor and author of *Finding My Way, Healing and Transformation Through*

Loss and Grief, writes: "Grief is a process of discovering the full extent of what was lost, what is left or can be restored, and using that conscious awareness to create new possibilities."² Psychotherapist and author Miriam Greenspan spoke similarly about grief in an interview about her new book *Healing Through The Dark Emotions: The Wisdom of Grief, Fear and Despair*. She says: "Grief is a teacher. It tells us that we are not alone; that we are interconnected; that what connects us also breaks our hearts — which is as it should be. Most people who allow themselves to grieve fully develop an increased sense of gratitude for their own lives. That's the alchemy: from grief to gratitude. None of us wants to go through these experiences, but they do bring us these gifts."³

"That's the alchemy," Greenspan writes. "From grief to gratitude." Transforming the experience of grief into the practice of gratitude is the primary spiritual task of our life's journey with loss, as individuals and as a congregation. Practicing gratitude does not minimize or attempt to end grief. It encourages being fully present to the full range of the experience of grief: the sadness, anger, frustration, confusion and unfairness of loss. There is a hope, in this full experience of emotion that a new sense of possibility can emerge which deepens our appreciation for the gift of life itself. Kahlil Gibran's words resonate from this morning's reading: "The deeper that sorrow carves into your being, the more joy you can contain."⁴

When we are ready, we can practice gratitude for the enduring gifts our loved ones offered to us and to the world, celebrating their life in what Thornton Wilder called "the greatest tribute." As a congregation, we can practice gratitude for the tremendous gifts Forrest Church offered to the life of this church and to our larger world.

In sickness or in health, we can practice gratitude for this gift of life we still have the privilege to receive each day, even when our existence in times feels partial. We can practice gratitude for the astounding beauty of this world, and for the spirit of a larger love that breaks through our aloneness to connect us, each to the other, as a part of this

²Schneider, John. *Transforming Consciousness While Embracing Change and Experiencing Grief*. http://seasonspress.com/general_pdfs/transf_grief.pdf. Web.

³ Platek, Barbara. "Through a Glass Darkly, Miriam Greenspan on Moving from Grief to Gratitude," *The Sun*. Jan. 2008: http://www.thesunmagazine.org/issues/385/through_a_glass_darkly. Web.

⁴ Gibran, Kahlil. *The Prophet*. New York: Alfred A. Knoph, 2001 (first printing 1923). 29.

beloved religious community.

To close, come back with me to revisit our story from the *life* of the Buddha. After Siddhartha encountered his four messengers, he devoted his life to respond to the question: “How can life be happy and joyful if we suffer and must die?” He nearly lost his life trying to find meaning in suffering, and eventually found his way back to a middle way, where he finally experienced enlightenment and became the spiritual teacher we today call the Buddha.

Each day, in our own ways, we are called to ask Siddhartha’s question and respond. “How can life be happy and joyful if we suffer and must die?” Today, we recognize the messengers in our midst, those who teach us to find meaning in life and death. We begin to explore a deeper awareness of the role that loss plays in our life, both small and large. We begin to transform grief into gratitude, making space for joy and sorrow to dwell together without conflict. We begin, in the words of the Rev. Forrest Church, to “live in such a way that our lives are worth dying for.”⁵ How then will you respond tomorrow?

To our shared journey of faith, blessed be, and Amen.

⁵ Church, Forrest. *Love and Death: My Journey Through the Valley of the Shadow*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2008.