

White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

Carrying My Buckets

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WHITE BEAR UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH
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FIRST READING “Heavy” *Mary Oliver*

That time
I thought I could not
go any closer to grief
without dying

I went closer,
and I did not die.
Surely God
had his hand in this,

as well as friends.
Still, I was bent,
and my laughter,
as the poet said,

was nowhere to be found.
Then said my friend Daniel,
(brave even among lions),
“It’s not the weight you carry

but how you carry it –
books, bricks, grief –
it’s all in the way
you embrace it, balance it, carry it

when you cannot, and would not,
put it down.”
So I went practicing.
Have you noticed?
Have you heard
the laughter
that comes, now and again,
out of my startled mouth?

How I linger
to admire, admire, admire
the things of this world
that are kind, and maybe

also troubled –
roses in the wind,
the sea geese on the steep waves,
a love
to which there is no reply?

SECOND READING “The Grandmothers” *Virginia Hamilton Adair*

As widows in their fifties
 they donned black, my grandmothers:
 high-necked, tight-waisted, corseted,
 silk for Sundays, crepe for afternoons,
 checkerboard black and white
 for morning duties; ebony cross
 with pearls, a gold watch pinned
 on the chest, a birthstone brooch,
 black shoes, black hose, black veils,
 black god-knows-what-else never seen.
 Oh, there might be a silver fox
 wotj black, black eyes and nose
 over the shoulders, and in puffs and coils
 of silver hair, thick combs of tortoiseshell
 not quite so black, but dark.

Black was the ribbon on the wreath
 that hung on the door for the husband
 newly dead. Handkerchiefs were edged

in black, notepaper had a border
 pf black to signal widowhood.

But they were merry, my grandmothers-
 Their mirth flowed over at a jest,
 a child's naivete, the ways
 of the sultanic black cat...
 I see one at the piano: “Liebestod”
 romps into “Maple Leaf Rag,”
 her black toe tapping. I see the other at the
 backyard pump
 with a bowl of surplus pancakes
 for the birds: orioles, tanagers,
 jays and cardinals, wild with color
 and competition. I hear her cries
 of laughter as her blacksleeved arms
 hold the hotcakes aloft
 among the dip and swirl of brilliant wings.

THIRD READING *from Mark Doty*

We are the elements of the world's consciousness of itself, and thus we are necessary:
 replaceable and irreplaceable at once. Someone will take our places, but then again there will
 never be anyone like us, no one who will see quite this way. We are a sudden flowering of
 seeing, among millions of such blossomings. Like the innumerable tiny stars on the branching
 stalk of the sea lavender: it takes how many – a thousand? – to construct this violet sheen, this
 little shaking cloud of flowers.

Carrying My Buckets

A Minnesota poet paints a familiar picture in the fall: dead leaves, still on the branch, covered by frost in the morning. John Caddy writes:

*Stubborn ironwood leaves found
crystal embellishment last night, a gift
of water vapor and its freezing point,
when hoarfrost began to grow its own
ferny leaves right upon [these ones] too obstinate to fall.
In hours the frost will vanish into air
as if to show the old leaves how it's done:*

*Arrive,
Be beautiful,
Be gone.*

The wisdom of the frost is wise for us also. No matter how smart we are, how scientifically or spiritually adept, we cling to intimations of immortality. We forget, we make a lifetime of forgetting death, forgetting that our chief work on the earth is to follow frost and falling leaves: *Arrive, be beautiful, be gone.*

That was the whole work, the mission and the task, for all these people here [each presented by candle on our altar]: *Arrive and shine and go in peace. And yet and still, they are not gone.*

Another poet asks,

*Did someone say that there would be an end,
...Oh, an end to love and [grieving]?*

*Tell me again, while the last leaves are falling:
"Dear child, what has been once so interwoven
Cannot be unraveled, nor the gift ungiven."*

*Now the dead move through all of us still glowing,
Mother and child, lover and lover mated,
Are wound and bound together and enflowing...
Listen...
As the lost human voices speak through us
and blend our complex love,
our mourning without end. [May Sarton]*

Our mourning without end. When you have known a mighty loss, a wrenching, seismic, cataclysmic loss – parent, lover, sister, brother, partner, child or friend – when you have known a shuddering, echoing loss, there's nothing you can know more certainly than the absence of that person: everywhere and always the presence of their absence. And yet and still, there's memory.

And yet and still, they come to you, in your dreams, or in your waking. There's memory, and more than memory, there's presence of a different kind, a hallowing of all the world they left behind. *The dead move through all of us, still glowing...*

A colleague of mine, a hospital chaplain, was asked once a series of blunt questions by a younger minister about his work with people dying.

What do you do? he said, in an email.

Most often I sit quietly, he wrote, accompanying them until the process is complete. Then I sit with the complexities of the moment, as relief and the joy of release co-mingle with the sorrow and the loss. I allow the power of the moment to reshape me even as the deceased person is reshaped.

What happens to the person?

The active life, woven into a human spirit by multiple strands of the Life Universal, unravels, and in the unraveling, it ends.

What happens to the body?

It dis-integrates, and in its disintegration sustains other configurations of the Life Universal—new lives.

What happens to the soul?

As the Quakers so beautifully sing, life flows on in endless song. For all of its duration, the soul, life wisdom, has been in constant communion with the God-Soul, the Oversoul. It has touched and shared itself with countless other human souls in its career. The sharing has changed other souls, who then change yet more. So while the soul of the deceased is itself dissolved, its memory transcends time, flowing through all the souls who knew it. It is in the God-Soul's memory that it finds its home and its salvation.

How do you mourn the loss?

We celebrate beloved life by re-membering, re-collection. But this can only be incomplete on our own. We need community, including the presence of the God-Soul, to properly re-member the dead. (from Rev. Keith Goheen, adapted)

I don't know if I'd express it exactly like this, but I like this sense of the material body returning to all matter, and the sense of the soul as part of something far larger than itself: the light within is a glimmer of all light; the soul within is a portion of all souls. These beloved dead are part and parcel of each other and of us and of all the saints who came before. This universalism, this transcendentalism, dispels the myths of self-sufficiency and individualism. We always wonder, all our lives, what happens when we die, what becomes of those we loved, what becomes of us remaining. We feel diminished in sorrow, we're so small when we grieve; you literally feel

shrunk, vulnerable, as brittle as dry leaves – and yet, the soul enlarges. We are made of one another. In the moment of sharp grief, no grand idea can offer comfort, but in the larger arc of time, for me at least, there's solace here.

It reminds me of Mark Doty's image of sea lavender:

We are the elements of the world's consciousness of itself, and thus we are necessary: replaceable and irreplaceable at once. Someone will take our places, but then again there will never be anyone like us, no one who will see quite this way. We are a sudden flowering of seeing, among millions of such blossoms. Like the innumerable tiny stars on the branching stalk of the sea lavender: it takes how many – a thousand? – to construct this violet sheen, this little shaking cloud of flowers.

I used not to understand this. Raised on the American narrative of bootstrap pioneers and heroes, and enchanted later on by the Unitarian narrative of free thought and free agency (every one of us a fierce and tiny island, building our own theologies with our own strong, opinionated hands), my early understanding was less of an interdependent web than of a great sandbox for philosophical parallel play: *we're all in this together, separately*. I understood both science and spirit even less than I do now, and was less mindful of my abject indebtedness, my defining indebtedness, to other people, living and dead, who have left a trace upon me. It's as if we're made not of skin and bone, rigidly encased, but clay, just as the old Bible story said. We're made of soft material, not completely hardened in the kiln, and we are shaped and formed, transformed, reformed, by every meaningful encounter. People leave their marks on us. We carry them with us therefore, all the ones we've loved and lost, and all the ones still living. The ancient ones believed the veil between the worlds is thin at Samhain, Halloween; I think it always is.

We go around, we travel through this life, with pockets full of memories, buckets full of snapshots, wisps of voices, whispered songs, placed in our ear and on our hearts by people we've known who are gone from our life (some simply drifted away over time, no longer in touch, and others fully gone, the ones who've died). I go around – you do, too - waking and sleeping, with pockets of wisdom, flashes of insight, glimpses of light: the press of a hand on your shoulder which you won't feel again ... and will never stop feeling; the sound of loved laughter you will not hear again... and will never stop hearing; the way you saw your own self when that person was looking at you: it won't happen again in this life, but it changed you. That way of knowing yourself, seeing yourself, is within you, and safe. Some such memories are foundations in our lives, set down by those who mattered most. More frequently, they're small and fleeting. We're all made up of large and little pieces.

Years ago, for example, Ross and I were teachers at a farm school in New England, a year-round, live-in school where children learned reading and writing and history, music and dancing and art; how to milk cows, tend chickens, kill chickens; mow and bale hay; build sturdy buildings; keep newborn lambs alive in winter; read the weather in the sky. The school was started by a couple whose son was born with profound developmental disabilities. The local kindergarten was unprepared to take him, so the parents made a school around him, and local children came, and stayed – way up into high school. A--- was just my age; the year when Ross

and I were there he was 26, a big strong guy who loved to be outside working with machinery and animals, more than he liked talking. One day in the winter I was hauling water to old horses in a remote pasture; there was no way to get there except on foot. The snow was deep and I had two five-gallon buckets, sloshing all over in the freezing cold. A--- saw me from some distance and threw down whatever he was doing. He came barreling over, bellowing my name. VICTORIA! When he reached me he was out of breath and adamant. He picked up the buckets I had set down and said, "I can do it. You're short. And weak." He raised them easily and strode off to water the horses. I trotted alongside, trying at first to dissuade him, then to thank him. A--- just said, "Yeah," and ambled off. It was an act of kindness, but not random. It was an act of practical kindness. It made sense. I don't think Andy saw it as a favor to me; it was more an act of ordering a disordered cosmos. "Something was wrong with this picture," and he fixed it because he saw it, and he could. The whole thing lasted maybe 15 minutes, but it moved me profoundly. I've carried that transaction with me all this time, in my pocket, in my heart, in the buckets of wisdom I haul around. I'm still learning how to see with the same wide-angle vision A--- had, how to notice other people in that way, as if their struggles had something to do with me. In the rare moments when I harness that, and the more frequent moments when I wish I had, I think of him. He was the one not smart enough to go to school, but I'm the one still trying to understand that sometimes "doing the right thing" just makes sense. You don't have to overthink it, or work it out. You just do it, because you can. I think that's what justice is, intimate justice and global; it's noticing the disordered world, naming it, and setting it right.

A---'s life brushed against mine only briefly, but I carry the impact still, and there are thousands of such impacts and impressions and infinitesimal life-changing encounters in our lives. Pieces of ourselves rub off on other people, for better and for worse. They leave an indelible mark, and so it's hard to say the dead are truly gone when they go, and impossible to say that anyone, any one of us, is utterly an individual. We're bereft, but they are part of us. I know it.

Think of someone you have loved and lost. What remains is complicated, more complex than sadness, but you weave it all in. I think of my father. I carry the memory of a childhood saturated with his alcoholism. I carry the memory of a childhood steeped in his love of literature and music. I carry the legacy of a man who was not entirely whole (-but show me someone who is). I carry the legacy of a man who was not entirely broken- and nether am I, or you. The strands and shards of legacy fit themselves into our brokenness and wholeness, and we carry it all, bits and pieces of all souls.

Brother, sister, lover, parent, child, beloved friend, companions of our days – somehow they get away. They melt away like hoarfrost in the morning. *Arrive, be beautiful, be gone.* And yet they're not, especially if we remember our own work in the moment, which is neither arrival nor leaving, but **shining** in the middle. In their honor, in their memory, with gratitude and wonder, we're here to shine like stars, like comets, for this little while.

Last spring one of you forwarded to me a beautiful letter written by a college president when his campus was shaken by tragedy: two students died in the same semester, one in an accident, and one in the terrorist attack in Brussels. Seamus Carey is President of Transylvania University in Kentucky. This is part of what he wrote to his community:

These tragedies have hurt us with their absolute incoherence, their absurd want of meaning, and their cruel violence. We are a loving community and such deaths go against so much of what we teach and defend with our hearts and minds. We seek so hard to understand things and the world, to plot out and measure their orbits, to expose their secrets, and to find their meaning. But there is not, and never will be, an explanation for accidental death and if there were, the knowledge would not provide the solace we need. Such a death reminds us that there are times when life hurts like hell and it will not be alright. But it also teaches us to cherish what we have of the person we lost and to remember to ask each other how we are now, today. We must choose to be open and vulnerable to the world, to meet it through our tears with wonder, and amazement, and modesty, with doubt and faith and rage cried out to the heavens. This death reminds us to share the love we're holding back.

[This other] death was not accidental. Terrorists killed her for a politics in which she played no part, and she is a victim of a war in which she was no combatant. I will not believe that anyone's God, no matter how much glory they proclaim, will ever accept murderous devotions... her death is proof of the damnable arrogance of all certainties.

Going forward, as hard as it may be, we need fiercely to hope. There is no end to grief, but there is fortitude and gratitude, and forgiveness, and a return in time to joy. Together we have the strength to bear up under what we have been given. We have the power in what we teach and what we learn to ensure that no one feels so voiceless that killing is an answer, that no one imagines themselves so alone that killing is a comfort, that no one feels so enraged that murder is a prayer. We teach the light that others may learn from that light. We need, each of us, all of us, to ignite a thousand candles.

We have come through a terrible time. But we have come through. There are memories to cherish and angers to turn into actions. There are friends and families to hold to a little more tightly; there are others to love more determinedly. There are also classes to attend, papers to write, exams to take and grade. There is life and living.

Let us remember them by remaking the world. Let their legacy be our resolve to seek justice, to grant mercy, and to serve the world and all who dwell in it.

For now, with our pockets full of memories, buckets full of grief and joy, for these days or these years between our arrival and our melting away, our whole work is to shine.

Virginia Hamilton Adair writes about her grandmothers in their mourning black, so prim and grim. *But they were merry*, she reports.

*I see one at the piano: "Liebestod"
romps into "Maple Leaf Rag,"
her black toe tapping. I see the other one [in] the backyard
with a bowl of pancakes for the birds... I hear her cries
of laughter...
among the swirl of brilliant wings.*

They are merry not in denial of death, but fully in its face. They're shining.

And Mary Oliver:

*That time
I thought I could not
go any closer to grief
without dying*

*I went closer,
and I did not die.
Surely God
had his hand in this,*

*as well as friends.
Still, I was bent,
and my laughter...
was nowhere to be found....*

*So I went practicing.
Have you noticed?
Have you heard
the laughter
that comes, now and again,
out of my startled mouth?*

*How I linger
to admire, admire, admire
the things of this world
that are kind, and maybe*

*also troubled –
roses in the wind,
the sea geese on the steep waves,
a love
to which there is no reply?*

We go practicing. Our whole work here is to shine, defiantly, decidedly, knowing everything we know of life and death. We're here to be beautiful, to shine, to hold each other's sadness as our own, the sorrows of the world, the struggles- to just pick up the buckets. We're here to shine with gratitude and gladness, in wonderment that life is given us at all, to see what we can make of it, and what maybe we can leave behind.