

White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

Abide With Me

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WHITE BEAR UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH
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FIRST READING*Joyce Sutphen*

What the Heart Cannot Forget

Everything remembers something. The rock, its fiery bed,
cooling and fissuring into cracked pieces, the rub
of watery fingers along its edge.

The cloud remembers being elephant, camel, giraffe,
remembers being a veil over the face of the sun,
gathering itself together for the fall.

The turtle remembers the sea, sliding over and under
its belly, remembers legs like wings, escaping down
the sand under the beaks of savage birds.

The tree remembers the story of each ring, the years
of drought, the floods, the way things came
walking slowly towards it long ago.

And the skin remembers its scars, and the bone aches
where it was broken. The feet remember the dance,
and the arms remember lifting up the child.

The heart remembers everything it loved and gave away,
everything it lost and found again, and everyone
it loved, the heart cannot forget.

SECOND READING*Deborah Gordon Cooper*

Visitations

On Tuesday
in the produce aisle,
choosing my oranges by feel
and by their fragrance,
I hear my father
whistling in my ear.
A Scottish lullaby.
Everything else stops.
There is a tenderness no border can contain.
A web that may be glimpsed
in certain, unexpected plays of light,
or felt

like a shawl
 across one's shoulders
 laid by unseen hands.
 There are sounds in other decibels
 the heart can hear
 when the wind is right
 and the mind has quieted its clicking.
 The border guards are sleeping
 at their stations.
 Spirits come and go.
 The wall between the living and the dead
 is as yielding as a membrane,
 is as porous as a skin.
 Lay your palm against it
 and you can hear their voices
 in your hand
 and in the place where the chest opens
 like a flower.
 They are not far away,
 no farther than the breath,
 and enter us as easily,
 in pine and peonies,
 in oranges and rain.

THIRD READING *Ibtisam Barakat*

I have known a thousand kinds of death:

death of a plant on the window sill,
 death of a pet that listened more than a mother,
 death of a big dream because I could not find
 a big warm room for it in cold weather. . .

Not even one death was kind as it took
 without permission.

But all were generous: offering an absence --
 a fierce sunset followed by a feared darkness
 without which I would never have befriended

the moon,
 and the guiding stars in myself.

Abide With Me

*Who will take away sorrow,
Bear away grief?*

*Stream wash away
Float away sorrow,
Flow away, bear away
Wear away sorrow,
Carry away grief.*

*Mists hide away
Shroud my sorrow,
Cover the mountains,
Overcloud remembrance,
Hide away grief.*

*Earth take away
Make away sorrow,
Bury the lark's bones
Under the turf.
Bury my grief.*

*Black crow tear away
Rend away sorrow,
Talon and beak
Pluck out the heart
And the nerves of pain,
Tear away grief.*

*Sleep take away
Make away sorrow,
Take away time,
Fade away place,
Carry me away
From the world of my sorrow.*

*Song sigh away
Breathe away sorrow,
Words tell away,
Spell away sorrow,
Charm away grief.*

[Kathleen Raine, *Spell Against Sorrow*, 1952, adapted]

If only we had magic powers; if only we could cast a spell of protection around ourselves and those we love, around everyone (why not?), around every human person whose heart might ever

break, which is every human person: *earth take away, make away sorrow, sleep cast away, sigh away grief...*

... because sometimes it is larger than our hands can hold. Sometimes we're okay, or sort of okay, but when someone whom we love has died, sometimes grief, no matter how recent the loss or how distant, sometimes grief is a bigger presence, a bigger companion than can fit in the little house that is our consciousness. It's too big, it shatters us entirely. Sometimes we can handle it, even graciously welcome it, as you would any guest, especially an ancient, well-traveled guest, one with wisdom to share and lessons to teach. Sometimes we can handle it, sometimes we invite it in, but sometimes grief comes stomping uninvited with its huge, unruly, dangerous boots, and sits splayed in the middle of everything, sucking all the air from the room and from your spirit until, literally, it's hard to breathe. It is a wild wind rattling the window of your mind, except when it's dead silent, so numbing and so dull as to make everything around you and within you boring. Even the most sparkling, lovely things have no luster anymore. In this way grief is very much like its rogue relative, depression. Grief is a block of cement with rough sides and sharp corners, a cement block congealing now, hardening inside your chest, threatening to break not just your heart, but your ribcage, not just your heart but your bones. This is how it feels.

*Song sigh away, breathe away sorrow...
Pluck out the heart and the nerves of pain...
Talon and beak, tear away grief...*

...till we can draw a breath again, and lift our heads and smile and want to be alive again.

There are times, not often, but some specific times, when most of us, I think, wish just a little that our religion here could offer us some charms and spells and incantations, potions to dispel, or even just dilute a bit, the potency of grief, its presence and its power - because it is that. It is not only an emotion or a feeling, not just an attitude, a "phase," a state of mind - but a presence. It is the *presence of absence*, and the fact is, instead of charms and spells all we have are plain remedies, over-the-counter remedies that we must trust will heal us: time and memory and kindness, the deep, deep ordinary kindness and compassion of each other. We have to trust that these will be enough to heal us, time and memory and kindness, for we're all in the same boat.

St. John of the Cross, Christian mystic centuries ago in Spain, said this:

I saw the river over which every soul must pass to reach the kingdom of heaven and the name of that river was sorrow. And I saw the boat which carries souls across the river, and the name of that boat was love.

We're all swimming that same water, all in that same boat.

A couple of weeks ago I was in a coffee shop in Rochester, near the Mayo clinic, a Caribou Coffee. In that place you see everybody, all at once, and you see how all of us are striving, all the time, in this brief moment that we're each allotted between the mystery before our birth and the mystery we enter when we die. In a coffee shop on a glorious, golden Sunday afternoon in Rochester, Minnesota, near this mighty hospital, you can focus the lens of your compassion and

see that all of us, while we're living, are striving; we're just trying, most of the time, to do our best, just trying to get by. You see busy people grabbing coffee in their scrubs with their nametags clipped to their pockets (maybe nurses, maybe surgeons, maybe housekeeping staff - everybody looks a little bit the same in their work clothes and their Vikings caps and jackets). You see women in colorful scarves covering new baldness; people on crutches and people in wheelchairs, some with their arms in slings and others pulling wheelie cases, just in town to visit someone; and you see the guy behind the counter, with his tattoos and his ponytail, making lattes and making jokes, as if this were just an ordinary coffee shop, full of ordinary people, which in a way it is. It's a coffee shop I've actually been to before, with people I love, when they were either getting a test or waiting for results. We were in there many times a couple of years ago, before their cancer journey took them somewhere else.

Two weeks ago I was there by myself on a happy errand not connected to the hospital. It was still crowded and noisy with music and talking and the deafening espresso machine, and so I couldn't hear the two young women whom I saw standing near the back wall, who came in separately and found each other, and then just stood and held each other, held each other up, hugging each other for the longest time, sobbing the sobs that convulse your whole body. They were subtle, not making a scene, making no sound, but it was a tableau of sadness, like a medieval painting. It was like something St. John of the Cross might have seen in an old church in Spain in the 1500's. *I saw the river*, he said, *over which each of us must cross, and the name of that river is sorrow*. Clearly, something had happened, or was about to happen, and that something was undoubtedly grief, and I wished then that I had a spell in my pocket, or an amulet or a charm, to cast around those two a circle of protection. In time they sat down and talked and even smiled, and sipped their tea or coffee drinks, but there was a third chair at their table, and you could see grief was sitting there with them, patient and quiet, just companionship, as it would now forever, as present as the box of tissues that someone from another table, a stranger, had silently placed near their cups.

Grief abides when we lose someone we love, and kindness also, when we're fortunate - and so does something else. When I asked this month what happens to our loved ones when they die, asked you to write to me, tell me your belief, your thoughts, your experience of this, again and again it was clear that something else abides, takes up residence among us and within us, companionship our days.

Someone sent a quote she'd found. She found it just in time, because this is a woman whose son died just weeks ago at age 24 by suicide. She found these words, and sent them to me and to you:

Those we love don't go away, they walk beside us every day unseen, unheard, but always near, still missed and very dear.

She wrote: *This is how I think of him [her son]... I have frequent conversations... He helped make me the person and mother that I am today and I know he helps shape and guide me throughout the day. I have had some moments when I can feel him very close and some instances where I felt he was making himself present. One day recently I was upset and angry*

with him and through his actions I felt he was telling me to calm down. I believe that he is free from pain and anxiety and he is with us as we live out our days here on earth.

Something else abides: the presence, the spirit, the essence of a person. Not fully formed, not always there, and never on command, but showing up sometimes, to guide us and guard us, and help and heal and hold us. Some call that memory; others are convinced it's something more, that there are times when truly, the veil between the worlds is very thin. No one really knows. Deborah Gordon Cooper, a poet, describes a strange and wondrous thing that happens all the time:

*On Tuesday
in the produce aisle,
choosing my oranges by feel
and by their fragrance,
I hear my father
whistling in my ear.
Everything else stops.
There is a tenderness no border can contain...
like a shawl
across one's shoulders
laid by unseen hands...
The border guards are sleeping
at their stations.
Spirits come and go.
The wall between the living and the dead
is as yielding as a membrane,
is as porous as a skin.
They are not far away,
no farther than the breath,
and enter us as easily,
in pine and peonies,
in oranges and rain.*

They abide with us.

One of you wrote:

I have pondered much about death, as would be expected for someone who has lived long. The list is long of those who were dearest to me who are no longer living: my parents and their entire generation -- aunts, uncles, and all the cousins older than me, and my two older brothers, and my husband, and one daughter. I miss them all. Where are they? I believe that we all come from the loving, creative Spirit in the universe that I call God. And when our lives here are ended, we return to that God. How? In what way? That I do not know, but perhaps another adventure awaits. I do know that my parents live on in me and my siblings and in all the grandchildren. They shaped who I am, and I still remember their voices. All those whom I have loved have

added to who I have become and am still becoming because I have learned and grown and changed through their love and care. "Death may end a life, but it does not end a relationship."

Another person wrote,

*My beloved dead are always with me. As long as I remember them, they live. They "live" of course, in new ways ... for me, especially **in story**: the stories that have been told to me, and mostly in the stories I tell, those I read and write and borrow and edit and re-tell again. I have no idea what happens when we die. I hope my physical self becomes useful again, adding to the green beauty of the earth. I hope that my spirit rests in peace. I hope that for the fleeting time when I am still remembered, that I am remembered in love, as my beloved dead live on in stories.*

“Everything remembers something,” says the poet.

*The rock, its fiery bed,
cooling and fissuring into cracked pieces, the rub
of watery fingers along its edge.*

*The cloud remembers being elephant, camel, giraffe,
remembers being a veil over the face of the sun,
gathering itself together for the fall.*

*And the skin remembers its scars, and the bone aches
where it was broken. The feet remember the dance,
and the arms remember lifting up the child.*

*The heart remembers everything it loved and gave away,
everything it lost and found again, and everyone
it loved, the heart cannot forget.*

One of you wrote about a friend:

He taught me more about life, loss, love, gratitude, dignity, blessings, generosity, and then death, than anyone else in my life. My gratitude for him and the blessing he was in the world for me and so many others mingles with my selfish sadness that my friend is gone and I just so wish he wasn't. When I'm more peaceful and less terrified [of my own mortality], I can wonder about the amazing essence of life, of living, of being, and where that goes when we die. How can it be there and then not? Does it go into a pool of energy that comprises life and get redistributed elsewhere in the form of life? Does it simply contribute to the next plant, animal, person, in the form of "dust to dust"? Where could it possibly go? How can so much life energy shift through the continuum of space and time and seemingly vanish in our physical world? Does it just become heat or electricity dissipated? That feels so disappointing. Does it become sunshine? Star shine? Rain? Music? I don't know. I can imagine all sorts of beautiful things and poignant scenarios - perhaps that ultimately helps calm my fears. I don't have any answers, but I don't feel

afraid that I don't have them. But I wonder still and whenever I hear music, I still cry for my friend.

I read what people have sent this month, what they, what you, have offered us, this wealth of wisdom distilled from deepest loss, and I know that though I still wish sometimes I had a charm to *take away, make away, breathe away pain*, that we are made to weather it. I know this because I know you, and over all these years I have seen you do this, seen you weathering, and with a sturdy, radiant grace. We are made to hold our dead within us, and among us, and (this is the magic part) to summon their courage, to conjure up their kindness, their laughter, their strength, and return these to the world through the living of our lives. We are built to withstand grief, to survive and thrive in honor of our dead, and with their blessing. We have been constructed in such a way that we can safely travel all our days with sorrow as an intimate companion. Our hearts are built to see it in each other (sorrow, loss, grief, despair) and respond with all of our old-fashioned remedies, with kindness most of all. There is no one living now who will not someday be bereft, for we are made for love, and thus for loss.

“I have known a thousand kinds of death,” says Ibtisam Barakat,

*death of a plant on the window sill,
death of a pet that listened more than a mother,
death of a big dream because I could not find
a big warm room for it in cold weather. . .*

*Not even one death was kind as it took
without permission.*

*But all were generous: offering an absence --
a fierce sunset followed by a feared darkness
without which I would never have befriended*

*the moon,
and the guiding stars in myself.*

I'm learning, year by year, watching you, not to banish grief, but to offer it a chair, to see if it will sit by me and point me toward those guiding stars within myself, and see what kind of magic can be made by time and memory and kindness most of all.

SILENCE

At memorial services and funerals, I'm always surprised and moved by the music families choose to end the service, the music to go out on. We hear *Take Me Out to the Ballgame* a lot, whether the World Series is on or not, and we root for all manner of teams. We hear *In the Good Old Summertime*, *Anchors Aweigh*, and Beethoven and Bach, Led Zeppelin and Louis Armstrong – and Carol does not miss a beat; she plays it all with love and gusto. We hear *I'll Be Seeing You*,

Forever Young, Ashokan Farewell and Happy Trails. Last week someone played a recording from the original theme from *Star Trek*, and they asked me to bless the congregation at the end with the most generous of all benedictions: *Live long and prosper*. Often it's just a medley of old hymn tunes, and often it's *Abide with Me*. That hymn is a prayer, directed directly to God, but it's speaking to their person, too.

Abide with me.

Don't go completely.

Stand by me, stay by me, within me, just as long as I have breath.

That's an invitation also to grief, to stick around: not as a harsh, unbearable companion, but quietly and gently present, a presence opening your heart a little more, a little more, till it holds your person, and your memories, your regrets and your gladness, your stories and sadness, and every word you ever spoke, and did not get to speak.

Abide with us,

sense of eternal mystery,
source of constant hope.

Abide with us,

thankfulness and wonder,
love and even joy,
now and forever and ever.

Amen.