

## Remembering the Future

2020 May 24

This week felt heavier somehow. It's different for every person, different inside each one of us, up and down. For me it's been many things this week, including in a small way, the glorious springtime: it's raging now against the windows with such aggressive beauty, almost taunting me to be glad in it, which I am - but this lovely spring is also quietly reminding us that things are moving on in spite of us, the seasons are advancing, as they do, while we're all still here in a time-warp of crisis, moving forward but not really. It's been anxious this week, confusing, as "stay at home" transitions to "stay safe" without sufficient definition. And I know I'm feeling now, in Week 11, the heavy emptiness of loss – the loss of each of you especially and all the ways our congregation gathers, which are visceral ways, sensual, tangible, embodied ways of seeing, speaking, singing, hearing, listening, touching, holding and beholding. We are making new ways for this indeterminate interim time, but it is heavy work, and it's laced with loss.

*Whine, whine, whine.* That's not what Sunday morning's for.

There came a moment this week when my whiney spirit was not lifted exactly, but shifted, in an unexpected way, a good way, when on Wednesday for several hours I listened to an online vigil called *Naming the Lost*. For 24 hours, a group of mostly young adults shaped a simple, haunting memorial to those who've died from COVID 19. It may surprise you that this of all things shifted my spirit, but it did. For me it was the right and needful thing. One by one, each for maybe half an hour, they simply spoke the names, reading from a list on their screen or their phone, stumbling sometimes with pronunciation, but not stopping, pressing on; sometimes with a city attached to a name, or a country, sometimes with an age: 93 years old, 75 years old, 85 years old, so many, many elders. One person was 105, and here the reader had to stop and drink water, swallow the lump in her throat, breathe her way back to the screen and the list which went on and on. Sometimes a reader would whisper a prayer or offer a song, but mostly they just spoke the litany of names, right into the camera, right into my heart. I kept it on most of the afternoon, in the background, on an iPad next to my computer, and something shifted for me then. I remembered – and why is it so easy to forget? – I remembered why we're doing what we're doing, keeping apart, choosing a particular portion of loss, in our life as a congregation, or as families, or workers. With this murmur of names in the background, I think I was brought back to the difference between inconvenience and tragedy; the difference between worry or uncertainty and tragedy; the difference between losing your bearings a bit, and losing your life, or losing your dad or your brother or a friend.

Perspective helps. This is grief we're in, little and large. Perspective reminds us we're in it together, and this is grief that needs marking, wherever you are on the journey. I learned a long time ago from a wise teacher, a mentor who was dying, at the time, of cancer, who said to me, "There's no hierarchy of suffering, or if there is, it's probably a waste of time to try and map it out. Everybody's got something. Take a breath," said my friend, "and enter in through any door you find. Your own sadness is your ticket. Place your sorrow on the altar of the day next to everybody else's, and see what you can learn about compassion." There's no hierarchy of grief; it's more like an ocean, and some of us are standing on the shoreline with our ankles wet; and some of us, sometimes, are waist-deep in murky black water; and some are out there thrashing in the

wild waves, swimming for their lives, trying to make it back to shore. All of us are in this water always, including those who came before us, and those who will come after. In naming grief, and marking it, we cast lifelines to each other.

*Naming the Lost* is a vigil that will happen again; you can watch for it online. This first event was timed to coincide with Memorial Day, echoing the holiday's intention not to glorify war, but simply to remember those who've died. To hear those names, for hours, was heavy and sad, but that vigil was infused with light, so much tenderness and care, those quavering young voices. Somehow it shook me loose, called me back to why this is all so hard, and why, for now, it has to be. It also called me back to the uses of memory and ritual.

Years ago, Ross and I were teachers at a small farm school in Vermont, where it was the custom on Memorial Day to visit cemeteries in the little towns nearby. There were many of these – some in churchyards or next to open fields where churches used to be, some hidden far back in the woods, overgrown with brush and brambles. 20 children, 4 adults, piled into cars in the early morning, and went to maybe six or seven graveyards. At the entrance to each one, we joined hands in a horizontal line, then slowly walked the ground, looking out for graves of veterans. Some crumbling stones dated to the Revolutionary War and the war of 1812, the Civil War, and there were newer, taller, smoother stones for the two World Wars, Korea, Vietnam, all these soldiers and sailors now at rest, at ease, sleeping side by side with the civilians. It was a somber kind of game, but also lively, beautiful in the sunshine. Someone would call out, "Here's one, here's one!" and we'd rake the leaves off, replace last year's little faded American flag with a fresh one, and then a child would read out loud the name and dates and anything else on the tombstone. In some graveyards we found an area set off to the side, ringed by an iron rail, with unmarked smaller stones; this would be the "colored section," where African American or Native American people were buried, or Jews sometimes, or unmarried mothers dead in childbirth, all pushed to the margins, even in death. In those spaces we cleaned off every grave, every stone, laid flowers down, planted flags. Before leaving each cemetery, we made a circle by the gate and someone played the recorder, someone read a poem and we'd say together, "Let us not forget," before piling in the cars again.

Some of the students were in high school, but some were only 5 or 6 years old, remembering history they'd not yet even learned, wars they'd never heard of, sadnesses they could not yet imagine. It all felt right and fitting – the reading, the music, the circle, very simple, very solemn - but by the end of the day we were all playing hide and seek among the headstones, laughing and running, shouting, eating snacks, kids fighting over whose turn it was for the front seat – and that was right and fitting also. Like all rituals, this one was trying to teach us, adults and kids together, to remember how living and dying are all of a piece, how each life deserves marking, and mourning and naming and respect, even if the name's been rubbed away, or was never inscribed, or even if, as in our current situation, there are 93,000 dead in your country alone, and it takes a whole day and a night to read through them. Ritual reminds us how the little stories of our own small lives fit within a larger whole, touching everybody else's. And it teaches how kindness and courtesy matter, for the living and the dead, those we know and those we don't, all in the water together.

In the poem Sara read from Rob Jacques, he imagines what was in the minds of long ago Inuit people, who would leave signs of encouragement on frozen trails for future travelers - five stones arranged in human form:

*We were here. We saw sorrow.  
 Across our hearts, emptiness and cold  
 pulled hard, as they do in you now,  
 and we pressed on as you will do.  
 We did all that possibility will allow  
 and expect nothing less of you...  
 See in gray desolation how we made  
 this five-piece thing of stone and left it here,  
 to bring you certainty  
 in this drear, frozen waste, showing  
 you and we are keepers of a flame,  
 melting chaos. You and we proclaim.*

It's in times of struggle that we unpack what's been bequeathed to us by those who went before. They didn't know this struggle, maybe, but they did see some things, our ancestors, our parents, lovers and beloved friends who've died. They didn't know this struggle that we're in (it's hard to imagine how we could even explain it to them, trapped as they are on the other side of history), but they did see some things, and they speak to us still about how to get through it, how to go on. It's in times of struggle that we sift through memory and character and discern the kind of people that we are, the kind of people that we come from. And at the same time, exactly the same time, we're deciding, every day, proclaiming, what kind of people our children will come from, our own and all of them, the generations coming up, the ones who are watching us now and wanting to know, *how do you honor the dead? How do you honor the living, and comfort those who mourn? What's the best way to carry grief or conjure hope, or leave a sign, or cast a lifeline to someone who normally looks fine, but this week might be drowning?*

This past week on Wednesday our reading for reflection was from Theresa Soto, UU minister in Oakland. They ask,

*Can we develop the skill of remembering the future?*

*Can we commit to build the community that will extend into a time that we only know by memory because it will outlast us?*

*Memorize the compass points of the day yet to come: the truth, the love, the fire, the endless yes of the horizon. Shake the scales from your imagination: Reach, Stretch. Rise. There is no more time for pretending that everything can be all right without your care, without your attention.*

*You can mourn, grief being more real at times than the promise of the sunrise... And yet. While we mourn changes, losses, deceptions, and betrayals, beneath the ash we find the ember. We weep, and then, as we have learned from labor movements, we organize. Remember the day toward which we gather, the tomorrow toward which we advance. It is with your actions today that you engage that muscle memory, the ragged velvet feel of a day that you have never lived. It is also your day. Remember it well.*

What stories will they tell of us, the people who look back, years from now, on this Corona time? What markers can we leave for them, to encourage them, and leave a trail? I want them to look back at us years from now and say, “Those people, back in 2020, 2021, were really strong. They named their grief and marked it, even as they were still swimming in it, and named their joy deliberately, and they stuck together, with more care for the common good than for their own convenience, more care for the most vulnerable than for the rich and privileged. They never lost sight of the future, even when it felt foreclosed. And we’re the living proof of that,” they’ll say, “We’re their children and their grandchildren. We’re the future they imagined way back then.”

So here is one more story. A few weeks ago I read about a woman in New Jersey, Tanisha Brunson-Malone, 41 years old. She’s a forensic technician in a hospital morgue, doing work she says she knew she wanted to do even as a little kid, figuring out how the human body works, and why it stops working when it does. It’s so interesting, how people come into their vocation. She performs autopsies, preparing bodies for funerals, and she’s always loved her work, which she approaches like a calling, but these months of Covid have been different. Since March, the morgue where she works has had to expand into an adjacent parking garage, where bodies are stored in three refrigerated trucks, and one more in the parking lot outside. The weight of it began to wear her down. Her shifts are longer on both ends now than they ever used to be. At the end of March she began a daily practice which is saving her. Every day before work, and sometimes after work also, she goes to the Metropolitan Plant and Flower Exchange, a wholesaler, and buys all the daffodils they have. Sometimes she has to settle for carnations, but every day she goes to work with armloads of yellow flowers, and every day she goes through the morgue, and then out to those trailers, and she places a flower on every single body bag. She’s a technician, a scientist, who approaches the human body and death in a way that most of us don’t, not afraid or repulsed or sentimental. But it was breaking the flesh and blood heart inside her own chest to see all those people there, in a place where their loved ones can’t visit, many of whom died all alone. She doesn’t make a ton of money, but she spends about \$100 a week on flowers now, even with the discount from the florist, when they found out what she was doing. No one sees these flowers but her, and the funeral directors who come to pick up the bodies. One guy says that he and his crew just cried the first time they saw it, and sometimes unexpectedly they still do. Tanisha Brunson-Malone says it just feels like the right thing to do. She says it’s really as much for her as for anyone else. But I say it’s a sacrament. A proclamation, where without any words she says to them one by one, “I honor you, I speak your name. This humanizes both of us, binds us in sorrow and suffering and love.” There is nothing in her extensive anatomy training that could ever explain where exactly inside us such decorum and generosity and wisdom reside. How do we learn to be the humans that we are? How do we teach each other? What do we mean to pass on? When we remember the future, the tomorrow toward which we advance, what do we want it to look like? What kind of people will live in that world?

*There's a thread you follow, says the poet, William Stafford.  
It goes among things that change. But it doesn't change.*

This is the thread that winds through every funeral and memorial, through every wedding and welcoming of babies, every commemoration and graduation, the markings at the trailheads of our lives. It feels sometimes as if we're lost, as if everything has come undone, and we can't find our way. But there's a thread we follow, says the poet.

*It goes among things that change. But it doesn't change.  
People wonder about what you are pursuing.  
You have to explain about the thread.  
But it is hard for others to see.  
While you hold it you can't get lost.  
Tragedies happen; people get hurt  
or die; and you suffer and get old.  
Nothing you do can stop time's unfolding.  
You don't ever let go of the thread.*

Remember who you are, the kind of people you come from, weary and worn, but shining with love. Honorable. Name the grief, and name every glimpse of gladness: the greening world, the kindness of strangers, the faces of friends on the screen. Name the lost, and the living. Honor all that's lost, and also all that isn't. Consider, every day now, what would be worthy of those who came before us? What would bring honor to their memory? What would be worthy of those who'll come next?