

“Good Grief!”

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N.B. – These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship – supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer – and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

Sermon

As the story goes, there once was a young minister,
who was asked by a funeral director to hold a grave-side service
for a homeless man who had no family or friends.

The funeral was to be held at a cemetery way out in the countryside,
and this man would be the very first person laid to rest there.

As the minister wasn't familiar with this remote area,
he found himself lost in no time.

When he finally arrived, he was more than an hour late.

As he drove up, he saw the machinery
that had opened up a great rectangular hole in the earth.

And he saw the workers who were already eating their lunches.

But what he didn't see was a hearse or funeral director.

He apologised to the work crew for his tardiness,
and then stepped up to the side of the open grave,
where he instantly saw that the lid of the cement vault
had already been put into place.

He assured the guys that he wouldn't hold them up for long,
but explained that offering just a few words
still seemed the proper thing to do.

And, so, with the workers gathered 'round, still eating their lunches,

the preacher began to pour out his heart.

He preached and preached as he had never preached before.

As he spoke, with more and more passion,
raising his voice and shaking his fist,
the workers began to call out: “Amen” and “Praise the Lord!”

In time, with a prayer, he brought to an end
what had become a quite lengthy service.

He then walked to his car,
leaving the crew to close the grave.

As he opened the car door and took off his coat,
he overheard one of the workers say to another:
“I’ve never seen anything quite like that before
in the twenty years I’ve been putting in septic tanks.”

I’m happy to say that my first funeral at least included the deceased.
I can’t say, however, that it went all that much better.

More than twenty years ago, I officiated my first funeral,
not as a minister, but as a student chaplain on my long road to ordination.

I was then on the staff of a large predominantly lesbian and gay church
in Dallas, Texas, of all places.

Because it was the early 90’s, AIDS was decimating my church.

Each member of the staff with any inclination toward ministry
was frequently drafted to officiate memorial services,
as we had scores of them to do each year.

My first funeral took place on the edge of Bachman Lake,
at a nice enough funeral home.

I had only met Ricky a couple of times before he died,
but he told me a lot of his story—including the hard parts
about how his family had rejected him when he came out,
how they shunned him when he was diagnosed with HIV,

and how they had had nothing to do with him
as the virus took its toll on his body.

They were, though, his legal next of kin, and when he died,
they were responsible for making the arrangements for his burial.

Grief can be a curious thing.

The family planned an incredibly extravagant funeral,
complete with a beautiful casket, a parade of limousines,
and half the flowers to be found in Texas.

The problem was that they couldn't afford any of it.

When I walked into the foyer of the funeral home,
the director immediately informed me
that there wasn't going to be a funeral for Ricky that day.

As he talked about their inability to pay the required fees,
I peeked in to the chapel,
where members of Ricky's very large family
were practically climbing into the casket.

From these people, all clad in black, came the most unforgettable wailing—
the heart-breaking sound of human loss, the guttural sounds of grief.

It was in that moment that I did one of the boldest things I've ever done.

I told the director that there was, indeed, going to be a funeral
and that it was going to begin in about twenty minutes.

I said to him that the details should have been sorted out before—
but that they would now have to be sorted out later.

We had a funeral to do.

Needless to say, I did not become best buds
with the funeral director that day.

The ride to the cemetery,
sitting next to him in silence in the front seat of the hearse,

was one of the longest trips of my life.

But, that afternoon offered one of the most important lessons I've ever had about the depths of human grief and the importance of how we say goodbye.

It also opened my eyes to the vulnerability of the grieving and the sometimes unseemly side of the funeral industry.

Frankly, I suspect the funeral director was at least as much to blame in letting Ricky's family get in over their heads during their time of grief, as they were in committing to an extravagant event so far beyond their means.

There is a mantra amongst ministers that I've shared with some of you, as we've sat on opposite sides of a Kleenex box in my office: "grief touches grief touches grief."

The point being that one loss in our life can cause all of the other losses we've endured in the past to return to the forefront of our hearts.

We lose a job or we lose a pet, and suddenly we find ourselves overwhelmed all over again with the loss of a relationship, with the loss of a loved one, with the loss of a possibility that we thought for sure would flower into some shining future.

A new loss comes, and we realise that we live much of our lives looking through the bittersweet kaleidoscope of grief.

With each new loss, the scope turns just so, and our vision of what is before us is forever changed.

Teaching how to walk through that change—indeed, how to live with and to make sense of our losses—has long been a central task of religion, if not its defining purpose.

With any loss, but most especially with death,

the fabric of our lives is forever torn.

The hole that remains—the heart-shaped hole
that once was someone significant to our lives—
can take an impossibly long time to mend.

In the wake of some great loss,
too many people spend too much time
expecting their lives to eventually get “back to normal.”

Sometimes they even try to force it,
as though it’s possible to go “back to before.”

But the truth is that in the face of any significant loss,
we can only hope for “*new* normals.”

For life will never again be what it once was.

Complete healing may be too much to hope for.

And, yet, the amazing resilience of the human heart does,
with the passing of time, help us to find the strength to carry on.

None of this is easy. None of it is fun. It is life’s hardest slog.
But that renewed strength is the gift that grief eventually grants.

The problem is how few of us are willing and able
to do the hard work of grief to get it.

It’s no surprise given the degree
to which we minimize death in our culture.

How often we don’t want to be bothered by death,
be it ours or someone else’s.

How we die in hospitals, frequently out of sight.

How we’re usually cremated and our bodies seen
only by the strangers paid to carry out our “arrangements.”

How our obituaries read at the end, “no flowers, please,”

as we don't want to be a bother.

All of this seems to me a feeble attempt to keep death at bay—
a misguided effort to contain its ultimate power
by trying to keep death neat and tidy and as unobtrusive as possible.

But, death isn't tidy. It isn't tidy, at all. It's a mess.
And one way or another, it will, in the fullness of time,
make a mess of us all.

For those of us given a new day to breathe in the air of life,
grief is the way through the mess, if not quite out of it.

So, it's worth giving thought to how we grieve.

It's worth considering how we manage the loss of what we love—
because we will, of course, eventually lose everything.

As the unnamed poet put it:

'Tis a fearful thing
to love what death can touch.

A fearful thing
to love, hope, dream:
to be—
to be,
And! to lose.

A thing for fools, this,
and
a holy thing,
a holy thing
to love. . . .

Most of the great religions assign meaning to the purpose of our deaths.
For most, it is a release of some sort into transformation.
A threshold for rebirth or resurrection.

Such theologies can be a balm to a grieving soul.
There is comfort in the belief that death is not the end.

It is not a comfort, though,
that has been afforded to me or, I know, to many of you.

That can make death—and especially our own—all the more sobering.

Where theologies that look to an afterlife wonder what more is to come,
theologies lacking the promise of an afterlife
wonder whether our “one wild and precious life” is and has been enough.

As Forrest Church put it, our concern
is about living a life that is ultimately worth dying for.

In that theological context, the utterly mundane experience of grief,
common to us all, can have not only a very different meaning—
but be the source of life-giving power.

Grief is confirmation that we are alive—and that we have loved.

As wrenching as it is, it informs us like little else,
of what it means to be fully and utterly awake
to the precious privilege of being human.

That’s why I think we need better religious rituals
for dealing with death and coping with our grief.

As Unitarians, we do an extraordinary job
of honouring those who die with memorial services
that truly celebrate the beautiful complexity of each person.

And, yet, I feel, as a minister, that it’s not quite enough.

Unitarian memorial services typically happen after enough time has elapsed
that the searing pain and shock of loss has often subsided, at least a bit.

But how are we any different from Ricky’s family, wailing over his coffin?

Is our grief really somehow less
because we’re more restrained in how we show it?

I don’t think so.

Unheeded grief goes somewhere.
Maybe that's why grief touches grief—
because we have so much sorrow waiting to be shared,
so much grief waiting to be given its due.

One of the things I most admire and envy about Judaism
is its rich tradition of mourning customs.

When someone dies, the Jewish tradition acknowledges, as a community,
that those left behind are living in a profound state of grief.

Families sit shiva for days after a death.
They wear black and mirrors are covered with cloth.

Special chairs, low to the floor,
are brought in for the grieving.

People bring food to the home,
but refrain from conversation unless spoken to by the mourners.

Everyone honours that those in deepest grief need time and space.

For a year, mourners are acknowledged in Shabbat services
as they recite the Kaddish.

Over time, as the anniversary of a death approaches,
mourners slowly open themselves back to the fullness of life.

How different that is from the emerging traditions of our time.

Perhaps a few thoughtful cards are sent.
Perhaps someone posts on Facebook
and receives a round of sympathetic replies.

But, by and large, we expect people—and we expect ourselves—
to eventually get over it and get on with it.

I find myself wanting to fight that expectation,
because I don't believe it often matches
the time frame that grief truly demands.

Grief is messy and it is tedious. And it takes time.

The best description I've ever heard
is that grief is like eating an onion:
there are endless layers to peel away, and you cry a lot.

At this time of year, when so many religious traditions
call us to be mindful of our dead,
may we also be mindful of our grief
and that borne by all those around us.

May we be gentle with ourselves and with each other,
giving that time and space that is required
for the fabric of life to be stitched back together in the wake of death.

And may we find in the grief that we, ourselves, bear
the strength that gives substance to life's deepest hope—
that we might embrace it fully, for all that it is worth,
so that when we come to die,
ours will have been a life worth dying for.

Amen.