

No One Ever Mentions the Loss

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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.

Once upon a time, there was a woman on the subway,
dressed to the 9s, wearing a big fur coat
with what were, quite obviously, very expensive
leather, fur-trimmed gloves to match.¹

As many of us have done,
this woman was caught by surprise at having arrived so quickly at her stop.

A bit disoriented, she pulled herself together
and hurriedly leaped off the train.

As she passed through the doors, though,
she realized she only had one of her gloves.

She looked back into the train,
and spotted the other one next to the seat where she had been sitting.

And as the doors began to close,
she took the glove she had in her hand
and tossed it into the subway car, where it landed next to its mate.

Sometimes, we just have to “let it go.”

There are moments when the task before us
isn't so much to hang on for dear life, but to let go for dear life.

Times when it becomes clear that change, whether we like it or not,
is happening—right here and right now, to us.

And in those moments we are faced with a decision

¹ From a personal story told by Jane Rzepka.

about whether we can and will accept the change that has come—
whether we will roll with the punches and make the most of the situation.

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Change can, of course, mean many different things.

It can be a harbinger of glad tidings,
signaling that things are really going our way.

Change can be a boon,
bringing relief or renewal or even a feeling of resurrection.

We finish writing an exam and are overjoyed
at the realization that we never have to sit in that classroom again.

We bump into someone who takes our breath away
and realize that this just might go somewhere.

We learn that there's a baby on the way,
and suddenly the future opens before our eyes
in a way we've never seen.

Whenever it's suggested that people resist change,
this isn't typically the type of change being talked about.

If anything, we can't ever get quite enough of this type of change.

There are, though, as you well know, a variety of other types.

Sometimes change is expected, thoughtfully planned for, even.
Goals are set, and plans realized.
Everything unfolds, on time, according to design.

We take such change in stride,
usually because it's happening at a pace we can handle,
and within the range of what we expected would happen.

And, then, of course, there's the type of change
that is pretty much the exact opposite:
the unwelcome change that sweeps in with little or no warning at all.

We find our job—and the security it provided—
has come to a swift end.

We wake up to find, to our great shock,
that we're suddenly single again.

We receive a phone call that imparts to us
some terrible news we can barely comprehend.

We leave the doctor's office knowing
that what's left of our life will never be the same.

This type of change washes over us like a tsunami,
leaving what feels like only devastation in its wake.

Each lapping wave reminding us that things will be forever different—
that there's simply no going back to before.

This is the type of change that has us bargaining
with gods we might not even believe in—
just trying to cut a deal for “anything but this!”

As you certainly know, this is the type of change we do resist
with everything we've got, in whatever ways we possibly can.

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Ronald Heifetz, a highly-respected thinker on the art of leadership,
takes to task the idea that we humans are resistant to change in general.

He says that people don't resist change; what we resist is loss.

We don't resist change, so much as we resist
the possibility of losing something precious to us,
something possibly irreplaceable.

As a guru for leaders of change, Heifetz is making the point
that if you want to help lead people through some form of change,
you must first figure out what's at stake.

You have to give thought to what could possibly be lost.
Because that, whether it's ever named or not,
will be at the heart of any and all resistance to change.

Now, you don't have to be a change leader
to find an important lesson in Heifetz's words.

If you're anything like me, you need only look into your own story
and see how the fear of loss has played into your ability to embrace change.

Fear, quite obviously, can be a very healthy and helpful instinct to have.

It can protect us from harm,
and from decisions we may later regret.

The problem arises, though,
when we allow our fear of loss to run roughshod over everything else.

When we let our being afraid hold us back from making changes
that might be the very thing we need, if we are to grow, or even survive.

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Maybe you've heard of the monkeys who get caught
in the fairly simple box traps set by hunters in the jungle.

A small hole, wide enough for a monkey's open hand to squeeze through,
is cut into the top of a box, and a banana is placed inside.

Eventually, a monkey comes along, reaches in, and grabs the banana,
but is unable to withdraw his fist when clenched around his prize.

These traps work so well because the monkeys sit paralyzed
by their unwillingness to let go of what they cannot have.

The fear of losing a banana is enough
to keep the monkey ensnared in a trap of its own making.

I'm guessing I'm not alone in confessing that I am, at times,
about as bright as one of those monkeys,
hanging on for dear life, rather than recognizing that I must, instead, let go.

What the monkeys—and really even we human primates—
need to recognize, on a deep, deep level,
is that loss in an integral part of being alive.

To live is to lose things we hold dear, over and over again.

The unfolding of our lives will bring about a litany of losses,
leaving us easily overwhelmed, at times, with more grief than we can bear.

It's fully understandable that we would do everything in our power
to resist such heartache.

The temptation, though, is to retreat into our fear,
to hold on ever more tightly to what we have,
in the sacred hope that we can protect and preserve it
by turning away any chance of change.

Sometimes that's exactly the right response, but sometimes it's not.

For in holding something too tightly, we risk squeezing the life out of it.

In clinging, we sometimes push what we love away.

In a desperate attempt to control the outcome, or hang on to a moment,
we often come to see what little control we actually have.

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In his book, *Learning to Fall*, the writer Philip Simmons
tells of a long hike up to a mountaintop,
where he planned to sit meditating at the base of an ancient tree.

He had planned the trip for months.
He hiked for hours just to reach the spot.

At last, sitting atop the mountain, he waited for enlightenment to arrive.

He had come seeking transcendence and transformation,
and he was determined to get plenty of both.

He was looking for change, on his own terms.

As he settled into his meditation, he says:

...my back against the ancient tree's trunk,
my legs crossed, my spine erect, the sun warm on my face,
a gentle breeze lifting the hair on my forearms,
I closed my eyes, ready for my vision.

I waited. I waited some more.
I quieted my thoughts, stilled my breath.

It began as an itch, a small one, low down on my back,
something that with discipline I could ignore.

I bore down, counted my breath, focussed on my crown chakra.

The itch had become a tickle,
and moved higher on my back, disturbing my focus.

I held on, projecting a cone of white light
from my crown to the heavens, seeking contact.

[Then] the tickle rose between my shoulder blades,
becoming a torment, [until] I could bear it no longer:
I writhed and scratched, trying to hang on to my perfect moment.

What was this thing?
Was *this* the stirring of the kundalini energy,
rising up through my chakras, heralding my enlightenment?

No. It was an ant.

An ant had crawled up inside my shirt,
on business known only to itself.

It was stubborn and elusive,
and after more violent contortions, my meditation spoiled,
I removed my shirt, shook out the ant,
and spent the rest of the afternoon rambling over the rocks

before hiking down to the road.

I had come for a miracle. What I got was an ant.

Simmons' perfect moment of nirvana never came.

Instead, what he got was a bug bite and the insight that maybe the miracle he was seeking was actually the ant itself.

He says:

More than in those ancient trees,
more than in the mountains,
more than in the vast space stretching out before me,
the true nature of [the sacred] was revealed to me
in the humble climbing of an ant, after an intriguing smell, perhaps,
or the pleasing salty taste of skin.

It was the ant that returned me to the world,
that called me to another way of worship,
the way of all things ordinary and small,
the way of all that is imperfect,
the way of stubbornness and error,
the way of all that is transitory and comes to grief.

The ant was my messenger,
calling me back to a world that in truth I had never left.

Simmons, there on the mountaintop,
discovered that true religion calls us into the world, not out of it.

That it calls us to contend with the hardship
that is at the very heart of being human.

And that, sometimes, it bites.

While I'm moved by Simmons' insight about the ant,
what makes his story all the more powerful is that when it was written,
Simmons was a relatively young man who knew he was dying.

Diagnosed with ALS, the degenerative and fatal condition that would eventually take his life by slowly paralyzing his body, he was coming to terms, both literally and figuratively, with “learning to fall”—what he describes as our “work of learning to live richly in the face of loss.”²

He goes on to say that he found strength in embracing the paradox that “we deal most fruitfully with loss by accepting the fact that we will one day lose everything.”

“When we learn to fall,” he says, “we learn that only by letting go [of] our grip on all that we ordinarily find most precious—our achievements, our plans, our loved ones, our very selves—can we find, ultimately, the most profound freedom. In the act of letting go of our lives, we return more fully to them.”

As profound an insight as this is, it isn’t entirely new.

It was central to the teachings of the Buddha.

It was key to the message of Jesus, who taught that we find our lives in losing them.

It is a lesson that any of us can learn when we are awake to our lives.

It may not sound, at first, to be especially Unitarian.

Proudly independent and self-reliant, we don’t often or easily talk of giving up our grip on life, of letting go of our control—or at least our illusions of it.

Yet, we are, of course, made of the very same stuff as everyone else.

Our bodies give out.
Sadness may fall across our lives at any moment.
Tragedy can strike us like anyone else—and most certainly does.

² Philip Simmons, *Learning to Fall: Blessings of an Imperfect Life*, xi.

When the fault lines just beneath the surface of our lives shift,
and all we thought we knew of ourselves
and our place in the world is suddenly upended,
we are left, like all people, with that most basic, primal human question:
“So, what on earth do I do I do now?”

Simmons, who was for many years the editor of the *UU World Magazine*,
says that we simply have to *learn to fall*.

He says that, “When we learn to fall
we learn to accept the vulnerability that is our human endowment,
the cost of walking upright on the earth.”³

Shortly before he died at the age of 45,
having beaten the odds and lived for a decade with ALS,
Simmons’ alma mater, Amherst College,
awarded him an honorary doctorate, commending him
for: “confronting the very palpable evidence of his own mortality.”

Would that it were so—that we all might earn such a degree.

My colleague Victoria Safford points out that:
“[Simmons] did all that writing, and all that listening,
watching, noticing, loving the world, while he was wasting away.”

“Which,” she astutely adds,
“is what all of us are doing, at various velocities.”⁴

And, so we are.

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Friends, this life involves change,
and change involves loss, and loss involves grief.

May we, then, make peace with these stubborn facts of life.

³ Simmons, p. 11.

⁴ Victoria Safford, “Practising Imperfection.”

May we listen intently to our fear of loss for the lessons it has to teach,
but not be immobilized by our anxiety
and dread of things beyond our control.

And may we learn to truly welcome change as it comes,
by letting go and, even, learning to fall, with equanimity and grace,
that we might, again and again,
rise to meet life, anew.

Amen.

Closing Words

Our closing words are from Philip Simmons:

We are all—all of us—falling.

We are all, now, this moment, in the midst of that descent,
fallen from heights that may now seem only a dimly remembered dream, falling
toward a depth we can only imagine. . .

And, so let us pray that if we are falling from grace, . . . ,
[that we might] also fall *with* grace, *to* grace.

If we are falling toward pain and weakness,
let us also fall toward sweetness and strength.

[And,] if we are falling toward death, let us also fall toward life.”

*May it be so, this day and for all the days we are given.
Blessed Be and Amen.*