

“The Promise of Autumn”
First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto
A Sermon preached by Stephanie Gannon
on 27 September 2015

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.

What we need is here, Wendell Berry writes.

These words became my mantra over the summer. As I started my work as a hospice chaplain in mid-May, I was terrified. Shouldn't I be relaxing on the beach after having just graduated from seminary?? What was I getting myself into? I was afraid to be around people who were dying. I thought I'd run away or break down uncontrollably. I didn't think I could handle their emotions or those of their grieving loved ones. I even considered quitting the program. But some part of me *knew* I had to do the extra unit of CPE (Clinical Pastoral Education). I still had healing to do. And saying these soothing words of Berry's over and over reminded me that I had the tools required for the work. I just needed to trust.

The first patient of mine I loved was with us on the in-patient unit for three entire weeks—far longer than most of the patients who got transferred to the unit. Maria (not her real name) was a Latina from the Lower East Side dying from pancreatic cancer. She was only 57, a non-practicing Roman Catholic, and a single mother of two children—a 14 year daughter and a 28 year old son. In many ways, we couldn't be more different: she was a tough Dominican addict who repeatedly found herself in abusive relationships. She loved talking about make-up, hair styles, and the latest fashions.

On my first day of work there I got asked by the nurse practitioner if I wanted to accompany her as she took Maria downstairs to smoke a cigarette. Of course I said yes. I was curious about her and up for the adventure. When Maria saw us coming to put her in the wheelchair, her face lit up with a bright smile, and after the smoke break, her mood lifted noticeably, and she tried offering me chocolates and cookies she had stashed in her nightstand.

Maria taught me to see blessings in the midst of incredible suffering and loss. In one of our last conversations, she told me how happy she was that her son and daughter-in-law were able to conceive a baby after seven years of trying. She believed it was some kind of miracle that her daughter-in-law got pregnant while they were staying in her apartment. In Maria's eyes, it was somehow meant to be that new life emerged as she lay dying. Without complaining one bit about her pain or expressing any fears of death, Maria focused instead on celebrating her hopes with me for the next generation. I will never forget it. After she

died, I did a ritual in her room while her bed was still empty so I could find more closure and clear the space.

I referred to this summer as my “summer of goodbyes.” Every single patient I had I lost. I had to get used to saying goodbye. *Or not*. There were many goodbyes I finagled or completely avoided. I wasn’t able to face the truth. I didn’t want to feel those feelings myself or confront them in others, so better to pretend that tomorrow was another day and I’d “see them later!” Of course it wasn’t a good strategy, especially when I dared to love the person, which often happened, and my supervisor caught me on it. He insisted that I make a spiritual practice of saying goodbye. That I be intentional about it and say what my patients meant to me. Mutuality and gratitude were part of it too. The idea was to model this practice for the patients and their families, almost all of whom tended to find this difficult. I tried my best, but often failed. However painful it was, saying goodbye well could be a blessing for me as well as for those I was working with. It could help me to create space for new patients to enter. And it did.

One of the books I read over the summer was bestselling Christian author Joyce Rupp’s *Praying Our Goodbyes*. She declares at the end of the first chapter, “We cannot avoid the ache of autumn.”¹ Rupp invites her readers to ponder what autumn means to them, what it symbolizes. She sees it as the season of loss and of letting go.

This week we experienced the Autumn Equinox, so we’re officially in the season, though it may still feel like summer outside. What comes up *for you* at this time of year? What’s the main feeling you associate with the season? Do you become more anxious or sad as the wind blows and the leaves start falling off the trees? Do you become restless and tense as things become busier and time seems in greater demand, or do you tend to get excited and fired up? A recent *Huffington Post* headline caught my attention: “Autumn Anxiety Is Real, and Treatable.” It’s also true that in the Ayurvedic system at this time of year “Vata” or air, and dryness dominate, and it’s good to balance this with food and activities that ground us.

Joyce Rupp argues that, “Only after we have acknowledged our losses and have recognized the pain inherent in these goodbyes can we proceed on the journey of self-growth and greater love of others.”² She claims that when we resist the pain of goodbye,³ it doesn’t go away. The ache stays with us, and maybe even intensifies. Perhaps you’ve experienced this yourself.

Rupp lays out a four-step process of praying goodbye:

Recognition: we start by identifying or naming the loss we have experienced.

Reflection: then we take time to be still and sit with uncomfortable feelings of loss, loneliness, and helplessness. We feel whatever we need to feel, even the most negative feelings like anger or shame. This is also when we take time to listen. She recommends using the Psalms in this stage.

¹ Joyce Rupp, *Praying Our Goodbyes* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 2009) 13.

² *Ibid*, 12.

³ *Ibid*, 60.

Ritualization: we find rituals for marking the loss or transition. We use sacred texts with strong imagery or metaphors that speak to us and/or find symbolic objects, whether sacred or everyday ones. She encourages movement and action in this stage too, such as lighting a candle or looking at old photo albums. She also insists that touch can be a powerful part of healing in this stage too.

Reorientation: this is the phase in which deep healing and transformation occur, and we can begin to be ready for some new life to come in. Rupp believes that goodbyes *always* contain hellos. This is where her Christian resurrection theology betrays itself.

Now I know not all of you may be comfortable with prayer, but I think her method works without engaging in prayer in the traditional sense. Rupp's conviction is that we must live our goodbyes, embody them wholeheartedly, so as to make space for new growth. Maybe you embrace more the Buddhist teachings around impermanence and thus more easily find acceptance around change because you see it as inherent to all life. Or perhaps your spirituality is more tied to the cycles of nature and the rhythms of life and death. Or maybe (like me) you identify more with Hindu traditions. I'm thinking of the ferocious goddess Kali who lives in the cremation grounds and is often invoked at this time of year. She destroys what we need to clear out of our lives so that something new can take root. At the same time, as Kali Ma, Earth Mother, she nourishes all life and fosters an endless cycle of birth and death.

My biggest goodbye was the sudden death of my father from pancreatic cancer in the summer of 1999. We were very close, and I was completely unequipped for the experience. The last time I had seen him healthy was when I was dropping my parents off at the airport for a vacation in the Dominican Republic over spring break. My dad became very emotional as we said goodbye at the gate, but I didn't think anything of it. The next time I saw him was essentially on his death bed three months later. He'd lost a tremendous amount of weight and was jaundiced and on oxygen. I couldn't believe I was seeing the strong and authoritative father I once knew. He was clearly dying.

I was given the gift of being able to spend his last three weeks with him alongside my mother. Those were difficult days, as were the weeks and months that followed. I cried many tears, I raged against the injustice of his suffering and my and my family's loss, and I cried many more tears for all the experiences with him that might have been.

I was living in New England during the time, and that winter seemed incredibly long and hard. I never felt so isolated and sad. But spring did come, and with it my feeling drawn to join a religious community again. I was raised Irish Catholic, and the Church was always my dad's thing. Returning to church was one way for me to connect with him and his legacy again. I decided to check out the Unitarian church off one of the main streets of Amherst, Massachusetts. It was right across the street from my favorite coffee shop, and I'd long been intrigued by the sermon titles I read in the wayside pulpit as I walked or drove by. My first Sunday was the annual Flower Communion, and I was immediately hooked by the creative liturgy and liberal values on display. Thus began my intense and wonderful journey into Unitarian Universalism.

That fall I also attended a yoga class for the first time. It was held in a Y on the outskirts of town, and we were an awkward hodgepodge of beginner students. I loved it right away, although I didn't understand how to do the poses or get the movements. I felt better after class. I felt more connected. Thus began my process of healing my body and opening my heart through yoga asana and breathing exercises. I went on to become a serious practitioner and to study with many different teachers. Eventually I trained as a teacher myself.

Without these two main pillars of my faith and spirituality, I wouldn't be standing in front of you today. And I don't know if I would have opened myself to so much healing if I hadn't gone through the grieving process like I did. Something in me longed to open up and love again despite my painful experience of loss. Something in me believed that there could be life and beauty again.

What is autumn's promise? It's that spring is coming again. When we commit to the growth of intentionally saying goodbye—to that deeply meaningful process—we prepare ourselves for the new. I'm not claiming it'll be easy or fun. You will need to feel the ache, the inner emptiness, of autumn. And you will need to surrender and let go. This is a spiritual practice, and I invite you all to engage with it mindfully and find your own way of doing it. It will be worth the effort. At stake is your own growth.

As Wendell Berry insists, *What we need is here*. Let's trust in that and in life. Blessed be and amen.