

Bearing the Unbearable.

Sermon Delivered by Rev. Dr. Judith Wright

March 21, 2021

Unitarian Universalist Society of Laconia, NH

We have just passed the one-year anniversary in our country, and in the world of living with the terrible consequences of Covid-19.

One year ago, in the middle of March 2020, we, as a congregation made the decision to have on-line services, for the first time ever in the history of this congregation.

And today, we are facing a time of uncertainty with a reopening plan, and hopes that with more and more vaccinations, the pandemic will abate, and we can return to our sanctuary and worship together again in person.

And yet, even if that does occur sooner or later, we have lost so much during this past year.

Each one of us. We have not been able to touch or hug one another, in greeting or in acts of comfort.

We have not been able to be with one another in our sanctuary, and listen in person to the music we love to hear from Noelle and our choir.

We have not been able to have the concerts we love, nor the comfort of Coffee Hour, where we reconnect with one another socially.

It's been a very hard year.

What has been inspiring for me is that we keep on, keeping on, finding creative ways to do the ministries of this congregation.

-We now have LED lights in our sanctuary, due to the work of our Green Sanctuary Committee.

-We have new pillars in the front of our building completed by our Property Committee.

-Our Social Justice Committee along with the Green Sanctuary Committee have organized food drives for both humans and animals, and a plastic recycling drive to be repeated on April 17th.

-Our meetings in small groups on-line have continued – -The book discussion group has met monthly, and importantly has been reading about the realities of immigration issues.

-Our meditation group, which meets weekly, has been discerning how Buddhism is integrating (or not) with our Western world.

-Our poetry group has brought to light a number of poets and poems, some of which I hope we can share with you in future services.

-Our fund-raising committee has been busy and now is urging us to buy raffle tickets.

-Our worship committee has graciously and generously held our worship services on-line every week except for Labor Day, since last March, and helped a number of us learn how to be on Zoom.

-Our choir and our Music Director have recorded each week videos and put those videos on YouTube, for all to see.

-Our Administrator, Shirley Stokes has figured out how to help us stay better connected through our newsletter, and orders of worship and so much more.

-Our Pastoral Care Team has combed through our Directory, since last March and reached out through calls, emails and cards, to let us all know that we are connected with one another and loved.

-Our Communication team has created a new webpage that I invite all of you to visit and enjoy.

Special thanks to Noelle Beaudin, and Jen Mika for spear-heading this effort.

-Our Stewardship Committee is now inviting each of us to pledge, if we can.

And so much more, for sure.

So, we have been attentive to our congregation's well being, over the course of this past year, when we could not be together in person.

It's clear that many of us love this congregation, for we humans tend to focus on what we love.

And it is this love in part that makes us grieve right now, for all that we have lost over this past year as a congregation, individually, as a country, and indeed as a world.

So much has been lost, not just in our congregation, or individually, but in the world at large.

It's almost incomprehensible and it is continuing, in spite of the good news about the vaccines available now.

Because of the lockdowns and other pandemic threats, we have not been able to even just visit with one another, and share the simple pleasures of our lives with one another.

Some of us have been hospitalized with loved ones not permitted to visit. This is one of the most wrenching aspects of this past year for me.

Realizing that over half a million people in our country alone have died from the virus, many alone, in hospitals, without beloveds holding their hands, or prayers said, or each saying good-bye to one another.

This has been a year of grieving for so many. So very hard in so many ways.

Especially hard for those of us who have lost loved ones, and have not been able to have the normal rituals around the death of a beloved, such as a memorial service, or the reception of friends and family, coming together to share with us the grief and loss of their beloved.

The loss of a beloved during this time has been beyond words heart-breaking, Joanne Cacciatore, in her beautiful, little book, entitled "Grieving is Loving," writes:

that when a person beloved by us dies, our lives can become unbearable.

*And yet, we are asked - by life, by death - to bear it, to suffer the
insufferable, to endure the unendurable.¹*

Joanne's main thesis is that because we love, we suffer when we lose a beloved.

And our lives are forever changed, in ways we never could have imagined.

She urges us to face our grief, and by so doing, we become, in her words, "more fully human."

¹ Joanne Cacciatore. *Grieving is Loving*. Sommerville, MA: Wisdom Publication, 2020, p. 13.

She says that through grief *we can experience an alchemical transformation that cannot be contrived, hastened or imparted by others.*²

There is a famous Buddhist story of a young mother, Kisa Gautami, who was happily married to a wealthy merchant.

Her story illustrates such an alchemical transformation from grief.

When her only son, one year old, suddenly dies, she cannot comprehend what happened, and in her profound grief, she carries her baby's body around for many days, weeping and groaning, asking people in her village to help her revive her child. She is in deep denial that her child has died. Her grief is so immense, beyond words, really.

This is how it is, for many, when a beloved has died. We may not believe for a while that they have passed. We may have thoughts such as, "they'll be coming home soon," "They are just away for a while." We keep hearing their voices or imagining them returning.

I, for one, think sometimes that my deceased son may call me sometime during the week, or I will receive an email from Chailee, my granddaughter who died in September.

Or that my beloved dog Kelsang will be at my feet when I am cooking, and accidentally drop something.

Of course, they are not here, but in other ways, As Peter Baldwin and I had shared with one another this past week, they are still with me.

It takes time to realize the reality of such losses.

In a pastoral counseling session years ago, a woman in her mid-thirties spoke with me about her husband, who had committed suicide two years previously. She continued to hope that he would come through the front door in time for dinner.

So, denial can be difficult to overcome when a loved one has died.

Kisa Guatami would not give up her hope for her child's life, because of her profound love for her child. She wandered for days, asking villagers to help her son. Finally, she met a person who sent her to see the Buddha.

The Buddha met Kisa Guatami with deep compassion and love, and said to her, "there is only one way to help you, with what happened to your beloved son. Go and find me four or five mustard seeds from a family, in which there has never been a death.

So, Kisa Guatami, filled with hope, set out to find a house, where death had not visited.

And, we know, of course, that in every home she visited, someone had died. She finally understood what the Buddha was saying to her, that suffering is part of life, and every living being has a time to die.

² Joanne Cacciatore. P. 15.

Buddhists often teach that death is certain for every living being; the time of dying is not.

In the end, Kisa Guatami returned to the Buddha, and told him that she could not find any mustard seeds. With this, she realized that her son would not return to life, Her denial lifted, and while she continued to grieve, she was able to have services for his burial.

Over time, as this famous Buddhist story goes, she became a Buddhist nun.

This Buddhist story reveals the unimaginable pain of losing a beloved. In preparing for this sermon I had a flashback of a very painful memory, when I served as a chaplain in St Christopher's Children's Hospital in Philadelphia.

My beeper went off, and I was called to the Intensive Care Unit.

A mother was writhing on the floor tearing at her clothes, screaming, crying.

Her child had died suddenly and this mother, like Kisa Gautami, could not be consoled.

It was beyond heart-breaking.

And this pain and suffering over the death of a beloved is not just an aspect of our human grief.

For animals grieve as well. There is an astounding video of an orca whale named by we humans Tahlequah, or by scientists as J35, who lost her calf in 2018.³

She carried her dead baby for seventeen days, with the help of her pod in the Pacific ocean.

Two years later, this same orca, like Kisa Gautami, had discovered new life: she gave birth to a healthy son, much to the celebration of all.

Apparently, dolphins have also been observed carrying their dead young.

And I remember well learning about a matriarchal elephant, grieving for her dead relative, after being away for many months, from the site where her loved one had died.

She was observed standing over the very spot, where her beloved had passed, and whose bones remained on the ground on the African plain.

It's clear that we humans are not the only beings who grieve.

Like Kisa Guatami, I well remember helping in my counseling practice, a young woman who was about seven months pregnant with her second child.

She could not be open to the new life within her, and she told me she could not feel her baby moving inside her, even though her doctors assured her that her child was doing well.

She was still deeply grieving the loss of her first child, who had died about a year and an half earlier.

Because of my training on death and dying with Dr. Elizabeth Kubler Ross, I realized in this counseling session, that this Mom needed to let go of holding onto to her first born.

I helped her, through guided meditation, say good-bye to Jacob.

She needed to tell Jacob, on a spiritual level, that she loved him, and was so sad that they had such a short time together in this lifetime.

³ [Grieving Mother Orca Carries Dead Calf For More Than A Week, Over Hundreds Of Miles : NPR](#)

I gave her a pillow, to represent Jacob, and at the end of the session, she gave the pillow back to me.

The next time she came, a week later, she told me she had a wonderful dream about Jacob, And in the dream, they said their final good-byes.

She thanked me, and said, she was now feeling the new life growing within her.

It felt mysterious and mystical to me, what had happened, Beyond words, really.

One important learning for me about grief is that we have to face it, and integrate grief with the rest of ourselves -each in our own time, at a rate we can do so.

I love Denise Levertov's poem, *Talking to Grief*,
with the metaphor of grief *being like a homeless dog*,
who comes to the backdoor, for a crust, for a meatless bone.
I should trust you, she writes. I should let you into my home.

Into her heart, into her life.

For learning to become acquainted with our grief is so important for our well-being and for our becoming more fully human.

I recall one man, in his mid-fifties, at one of Elizabeth Kubler Ross's week-long workshops.

Through that very special environment, he was able, to finally weep about the death of his mother some thirty years earlier.

He had "encapsulated" his grief – buried his grief, deep within himself. And for those thirty years he carried the burden of that grief within him.

It was truly amazing to see the transformation that occurred, as he was finally able to say "good-bye" to his beloved mother.

Grief awakens us to the reality that others are suffering, too.

So many around us are suffering

This has been the longest year, and life has been transformed. And we, too, whether or not we know of someone who has died, we, too are grieving for life as it once was, and minimally, for this past year of our lives, where we have each lost so much.

I found Christine Rosetti's poem "Remember" read by Shela Cunningham
to be so very poignant, in terms of how we cannot know, when our everyday experiences of being with one another will end, when we can no longer hold one another's hand, or plan together for the day ahead.
What is so powerful for me in this poem is that she releases the living from holding onto her, after she has died, if such remembering makes them sad.

In this poem she is doing what we may call anticipatory grieving, grieving the loss of her own life, and the loss of her connection to her beloveds.

I don't know about you, but I did wonder at times throughout this past year, would I ever see my beloveds again?

We grieve because we love.

As Joanne Cacciatore says, "*the road of sorrow is not easy.*"

Right now, in the midst of this unimaginable pandemic, there have been so many deaths, and this dying continues.

Many people around the world, and around us, have been facing loneliness, fear, confusion, frustration, even anger.

All aspects of grief.

Even though the beauty of springtime is upon us, we cannot deny that our entire world is grieving, in ways we have never experienced before.

So, this is a time for us to open our hearts even more, -to be compassionate and caring wherever we can-- to love those we love, and to let them know we love them.

This is the time for us to better understand, as Kisa Gautami learned so long ago from the Buddha, that death and dying have always been with us, that grief is part of our lives, and that compassion and love for all is the antidote.

A number of us will not be able to go back "to life as usual" before the pandemic, because, in reality, because through such profound loss, we have been changed in ways we can not undo.

And yet, my hope is that we chose to stay open to life, to as Thich Nhat Hahn, who lived through the horrors of the Vietnam war, says, we can come *to stay open to the many gems of life.*

We can suddenly hear the birds singing,

the pines chanting, see the flowers blooming.

We can see the blue sky and the white clouds.

We can cherish each moment of our lives,

Whether we are grieving or not,

and fully embrace the life we each have been given.

Let me end with this poem by Joanne Cacciatore:

My heart shattered, broke into millions of pieces, the day you died.

And because there was nothing else to do, I let those shattered pieces land, softly in the world.

And when I could, again breathe, with a regular rhythm, I noticed, quietly, painfully, the places where my shattered heart came to rest.

Somewhere amid the fragments of your too- brief life, Reflecting ineluctable grief, I know

Your love is, by comparison, So much vaster and infinite than my shattering.⁴

Peace and love to you.

⁴ Ibid, p. 99.