

Lean On Me--Grief ©

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Rev. Julie Forest

Today is the day that we let our grief dogs inside our homes, inside our thoughts, inside our hearts, inside our sanctuary. And we mark a very sad day in the life of this religious community. A little over a year ago, the minister of this congregation died suddenly, without warning while she was away on vacation. There was no time to prepare. There was no time to say good-bye. There was no time to ask questions or continue ongoing conversations. There was no time to work on issues of disagreement. There was no time to say thank you. Many of the leaders of the church were so busy trying to keep the church going ... steering it through unbelievably choppy waters looking for a safe harbor, that they didn't have the time or the luxury to grieve. Even if her death was more of a peripheral experience for you, you felt the angst and trauma of the rest of the people in this community, the folks that you love and worship with every week. We mark this one-year anniversary today because ritual is very important in grief work. I was reminded of this when I attended our Unitarian Universalist General Assembly in New Orleans.

Every year since the merger of the Unitarians and the Universalists in 1961, members of the congregations that make up the association gather once a year in a different city to learn, to work for justice and to worship together. It is also a time when ministers are celebrated in the *Service of the Living Tradition*. Ministers in preliminary fellowship, ministers in final fellowship and retired ministers are celebrated. It is a big deal to a minister to participate in this ritual. It is also a time when we collectively mourn those ministers who have died during the past year. This year in particular was very moving for me as the minister emeritus from my home congregation, Rev. C. Leon Hopper was mourned alongside Rev. Susanne Marsh, the last settled minister of this congregation where I now serve as interim minister. I was so grateful for that ritual and I hope that you find worth in grief as we make our way through today. (Let's sing together-- Hymn #1002 "Comfort Me.")

What do we know about grief? We know that it affects the body. Feelings of grief and loss can affect our immune systems. Grief and loss can aggravate our arthritis. I often feel my grief in my lower back, sometimes in my knees. Sometimes my heart feels heavy and at other times I feel grief in my forehead as a headache or in my eyes that want to water and weep. Some people feel grief in their guts. It just depends. Another thing about grief: It tends to crop up around the anniversary of the occurrence of the loss and at holidays.

We know that the experience of a current grief triggers feelings and experiences of past grief. My mom's death reignited the grief I hold for my brother. Millions of people around the world watched the funeral of Princess Diana. Watching the riveting displays of ceremony was a safe way for them to contemplate and feel their own past grief. We also see this when famous actors like Carrie Fisher, or musicians like David Bowie or Prince or Selena died. People mourned not just that person, but also the people they were when they heard the music or saw the movies that these people were involved in. This is normal and healthy. Our grief is difficult to hold and contain. I like to think of grief like the waves of the ocean. Sometimes the tide is low and steady, at other times it can literally knock us off our feet.

Speaking of feet, in addition to the grief and losses surrounding the people we have known, and the people we ourselves have been in our younger years, there is also grief and loss surrounding parts of our bodies that no longer work well or are surgically removed.

Some of us lose the ability to climb every mountain. I just recently bought a house that has no stairs, because I have lost the robustness in my knees. Some of us have lost or will lose the ability to stand in the shower. Others have lost the ability to drive at night. There are losses of vocation or employment, which also result in a loss of identity and sometimes-even self-worth because our identities and our feelings of value are often so tied up in what we do in the world. We need ways to honor these changes and these losses. Sometimes we can lose a connection to our deepest wisest self and singing about it together in community helps to bring us back into alignment. (Let's sing together again-- Hymn #391—"Voice Still and Small")

Feelings of loss are a signal to ourselves--and the world--about that which we value: about what we hold to have the most meaning for us. And that is different for different people. My wife did not care that she lost her car or rather that we sold it last year as we prepared to move from Wisconsin to California. Our move to San Diego had very little loss associated with it. Maren missed her foodie group; I missed a colleague that had become a very close friend. But I did not miss the snow, and the minus-ten degree weather. I missed my doctor and my dentist but those were not big losses for me.

Other losses can, even in the midst of their pain, also lead to new awareness. While I was in New Orleans for our annual Unitarian Universalist General Assembly last week, I took a tour of the important sites and events in the lives of African Americans who resisted white supremacy in and around the city of New Orleans. Not only did we see the buildings that served as slave markets, we saw plaques and statues honoring slaveholders. There is an ongoing battle to remove these statues from the city. We saw the square where black folks were punished, tortured and killed. I learned what being “sold down the river” meant. I learned the story of how the “Separate but Equal” Supreme Court ruling came to be. I saw the school that Ruby Bridges attended, by herself, every day under armed protective guard while white folks holding their own babies in their arms shouted out hateful vile things at Ruby every morning. I saw the bridge on which the police shot the black folks who tried to cross the bridge to safety during Katrina. I saw the other bridge that the folks in the jail awaiting trial for misdemeanors were held for three days with no shade, in the horrid heat of the day, and no protection from the mosquitoes at night. And I saw all the empty lots in the Ninth Ward where homes had been. I learned of the trauma of over 1500 folks dying in and during Katrina’s aftermath and felt it in a new way.

So I’m not sure what I lost on this trip, perhaps a sense of innocence about the horrors that the black community faced and how it fit into a pattern of white supremacy and oppression of people of color that has been occurring since the 1600’s. And this loss has energized me to challenge systems of white privilege when I see them and I pray to see them more clearly every day. So not all loss is bad. I am proud

that I lost my ignorance about this and I am committed to work with other Unitarian Universalists and the Black Lives UU in our work for a more just world.

Just like my justice work is not done all by myself, neither is my grief and loss work. We need each other ... our grief can harden when left unexamined and unshared. When someone deeply listens to us and hears the stories of our pain, there is a softening in both the way we hold our pain and the way it holds us. When we hear stories of others' sadness and grief and remember our own stories, we grow our sense of empathy and compassion. We grow our awareness of that which binds each to all. And we grow our sense of resilience. This is especially true in the church community. When I sit next to Jan who lost her husband of 40 years and I see how she makes her way through the sorrow, I know that I will make it. When I hear stories of other folks that have lost a brother or a sister, I feel a special kinship with them. That is why we will have a chance to speak our stories of grief and loss after the service and to hear the stories of others. We may fall alone, but together we rise. We are the folks that lean on each other.

(Join with me in singing, "Lean on Me.")

In a few moments we will sing our closing song, "Blue Boat Home" which I understand to have been one of Rev. Suzanne's favorite hymns. As the notes of the postlude play out, you are invited to make your way to the common room as a picture of Rev. Suzanne and a plaque for her are put up next to the picture of Rev. Ken McLean. After coffee and lemonade, you are invited to return back to the sanctuary and participate in small, facilitated groups to share stories of your own experiences of grief and to be a listening ear to others in our community. We know that it is in our best interest as we try to be whole and healthy people that it behooves us to pay attention to and be mindful of our grief. Today we make a soft welcome space for our grief inside our hearts and inside our sanctuary. We know that the things that we feel grief about indicate what we truly value as we journey through the landscapes of our lives.

We are all on this journey together and no one gets out alive or untouched by loss. In fact, it is possible that all the little losses we experience prepare us for the big losses and help us face our own mortality.

“Drifting here with my ships companions all we kindred pilgrim souls making our way by the lights of the heavens...We were born upon the fathoms” (Mayer, P. (2002), Blue Boat Home,) seeking harbors and ports as we journey together in this wide universe. As we make our way through this day, through our grief and through our week let us go forth together knowing that we have each other.

Go in peace and for peace. Blessed Be. Amen.