

Soul Matters

A kaleidoscope of thoughts, images, stories, poetry, and ideas to engage hearts and minds.



Grief, Loss and Acceptance

March 2015

When I agreed last fall to prepare the Soul Matters packets while Rev. Carie was away, and then saw that one of the themes I'd be writing about was "Grief, Loss and Acceptance," my first thought was something along the lines of "Uh-oh! I don't know anything about that! I'm going to have to find an expert. Someone else. Anyone else. I don't know what I'm doing. I haven't got anything useful to say..."

How often do we react to grief and loss - whether our own or that of someone we care about - in exactly that way? Modern western culture does not teach us very well about living with grief and loss. Our institutions and cultural systems push us to move on very quickly, acknowledging the need to pause and mourn only the deepest of personal losses, the death of a close family member. (As if three days of bereavement leave were enough time to even begin the process of closure!)

But as human beings we feel grief whenever we experience a loss - not only that of a beloved to death, but other losses, whether life-disruptive or barely noticeable to those around us: the threat to security and stability that comes with the loss of a job or business; the loss of the familiar when we move from one home to another, whether by choice or forced by circumstance; the loss of both what was and what might have been, when relationships shatter or become estranged; even the loss of our former selves to changes in mind and body that come through accident, illness, or the slow influence of time.

Grief takes many forms: anger, denial, fear, desperate bargaining, confusion and deep sorrow. Eventually, by working with our grief, we come to accept the change that loss brings to our lives, and to mend the holes those losses leave in our hearts.

Let us be gentle with each other this month as we explore this challenging theme.

-- *Claire Curole*

Grief is not a disorder, a disease or a sign of weakness. It is an emotional, physical and spiritual necessity, the price you pay for love. The only cure for grief is to grieve.



~ Dr. Earl A Grollman,
Rabbi and author



This Soul Matters packet was created by Claire Curole at Unitarian Universalist Community Church of Augusta, ME.

Thoughts within were gleaned from the Soul Matters Network, the UUCC Resource Circle, and other sources.

If you would like to share your experience and wisdom for future packets, please email minister@augustauu.org. To receive an electronic copy please email info@augustauu.org. To learn more about Unitarian Universalist Community Church, please visit our website www.augustauu.org.



QUESTIONS TO WALK WITH



Excerpted from "How Not To Say The Wrong Thing", by Susan Silk & Barry Goldman - Op-Ed published in the LA Times, April 7, 2013



(Illustration by Wes Bausmith for the Los Angeles Times)

Drawing on her personal experience with cancer and the experiences of friends, psychologist Susan Silk developed this simple technique for communicating in a time of crisis.

It works for all kinds of crises: medical, legal, financial, romantic, even existential. [Susan] calls it the Ring Theory.

Draw a circle. This is the center ring. In it, put the name of the person at the center of the current trauma. Now draw a larger circle around the first one. In that ring put the name of the person next closest to the trauma.

Repeat the process as many times as you need to. In each larger ring put the next closest people. Parents and children before more distant relatives. Intimate friends in smaller rings, less intimate friends in larger ones. When you are done you have a Kvetching Order. One of Susan's patients found it useful to tape it to her refrigerator.

Here are the rules. The person in the center ring can say anything she wants to anyone, anywhere. She can kvetch and complain and whine and moan and curse the heavens and say, "Life is unfair" and "Why me?" That's the one payoff for being in the center ring.

Everyone else can say those things too, but only to people in larger rings.

When you are talking to a person in a ring smaller than yours, someone closer to the center of the crisis, the goal is to help. Listening is often more helpful than talking. But if you're going to open your mouth, ask yourself if what you are about to say is likely to provide comfort and support. If it isn't, don't say it.

If you want to scream or cry or complain, if you want to tell someone how shocked you are or how icky you feel, or whine about how it reminds you of all the terrible things that have happened to you lately, that's fine. It's a perfectly normal response. Just do it to someone in a bigger ring.

Comfort IN, dump OUT.

Most of us know this. Almost nobody would complain to the patient about how rotten she looks. Almost no one would say that looking at her makes them think of the fragility of life and their own closeness to death. In other words, we know enough not to dump into the center ring. Ring Theory merely expands that intuition and makes it more concrete: Don't just avoid dumping into the center ring, avoid dumping into any ring smaller than your own.

Does Susan Silk's technique resonate with you? How do you interact with others in times of loss or crisis? Was there a time you were in the "center ring" and wished those around you would behave differently?

Spiritual Practice

A new way of being for all ages

excerpted from "Grief and Life" - from Nothing Gold Can Stay: The Colors of Grief, by Mark Belletini

Although the deaths of those I love have shaped much of my thinking about grief, I am quite aware that loss, as Siddhartha, the Buddha, pointed out millennia ago, is with all of us every day in the flow of our lives.

Grief arises when I lose touch with a friend with whom I used to be close. "We've grown apart" is the common explanation for such events, but that does not mean I do not grieve. Although I cultivate friendships, sometimes they end anyway. We feel grief when leaving a job after years, or even a few weeks, if we liked the work but the new owners downsized us.

We experience grief when a shop or theater we have patronized for twenty years finally closes. We experience grief when something precious disappears: photos destroyed in a house fire or a bicycle stolen.

I have grieved at the end of a job, even if I resigned for good reasons. I have grieved when I have moved. I grieved when I moved away from a congregation I loved for eighteen years. I have grieved when friendships that once flashed brightly simply faded away, our lives taking us in divergent directions.

We feel grief when we lose some aspect of our health: loss of motion due to arthritis, loss of a diet of familiar foods because of an allergy that develops, loss of breast or limb or eyesight or hearing. When the cardiologist told me I had a permanent heart condition due, he theorized, to some virus, I grieved the loss of life without daily pills and regular echocardiograms. When a floater appeared in my eye, large and web-like, I grieved the loss of unimpaired peripheral vision. In this age when Alzheimer's disease still afflicts, one can experience loss of self too. My dear friend Flip suffered the difficulties of early-onset Alzheimer's, and died at age fifty-eight. But long before that he had lost his memory, and his sense of self, which had been built on the foundations of that memory.

Becoming aware of the smaller or denied griefs in our lives can help us let go of the invisible, and often larger spiritual aches in our tender hearts that sometimes keep us from moving forward for reasons we have not yet named.

Grief holds hands with life. Life holds hands with grief.

Here are some ideas for expressing and processing complex feelings of loss:

- Write a letter or poem about your experience. It can be addressed to a person who has died or from whom you are estranged, or to a beloved pet, place or community. If it seems appropriate to you, find someone with whom you can share your words.
- Create a visual image that captures your feelings: a painting or drawing, a photograph or collection of photographs, a collage or sculpture in any medium you choose. Share your image with someone and if you like, tell the story behind it.
- Assemble a collection of recorded music - a playlist or mix tape - that comforts you or helps you release your feelings around your experience. If you are willing, find someone to share it with, maybe even sing along. Try moving to the music: sway, rock or even dance as you are able.

Lessons Written In Stones

I have been thinking a lot about the internal structure of gemstones lately. About how you can't tell from the outside what it's going to look like on the inside, or how it will polish up. About the beautiful mystery that can hide in the middle of a plain mud-colored rock. About how the very structure that gives a stone its brilliant fire is the same flaw that can cause its failure under stress. About how beautiful things need to be handled gently.

And how, when they fail, sometimes even the shards are still beautiful.

My time for thinking about this, and for writing this reflection, came in the weeks after an unexpected personal crisis forced a sudden and unwelcome restructuring of my seminary plans. I had intended to proceed, full-throttle, with full time study, but it became painfully clear that I needed to slow down and engage in deep personal healing work that would not permit me to keep up with the expected timeline. I think I disappointed a lot of people; I know I disappointed myself, and I had to let go of a lot of shattered ideas about who I am and how I fit into the world. It was a hard shock that left me wrestling with difficult questions about what kind of minister I might hope to become, and whether there was any reason to keep going.

So things break. Spectacularly so. What happens *after*?

After the fall, *after* the shattering into a thousand shards, *after* the unbecoming of what might have been but isn't going to look exactly that way any more? What happens in the stillness that follows?

Part of my forced slowing down turned out to include becoming reacquainted with my rock collection, cleaning the dust off and taking photographs. I have been slowly reminded of things I used to know – the complex relationship between purity and perfection and beauty and fragility, how the things which are most interesting are not always the strongest or most flawless – and how those which are strong or flawless are not always the most interesting or beautiful.



And I have also been reminded that, given enough time and the proper conditions, even shattered stones can mend, become whole – not that which they *were*, not exactly, but something more, something different. There is a yearning in the structure of the crystal itself to grow into its characteristic shape; if the point is broken off, the crystal will – in its own slow time – form again into the pattern that is its nature.

Or perhaps, like the veins in jasper or the center of a thunder-egg, the cracks will be filled in with something entirely new and beautiful.

May it be so.

*-- Claire Curole
(adapted from a blog post written July, 2014)*

Several Small Group Ministry sessions on topics related to Grief, Loss, Death and Dying are available for use or reference. Please contact Kathy Kellison or Helen Zidowecki for more information.

If you or someone near you needs help coping with grief or loss, please contact Reverend Carie Johnsen or a member of the Pastoral Ministry team.