

Ambiguous Loss

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Bellingham Unitarian Fellowship ~ www.buf.org

Rev. Paul Beckel

As I was walking up the stair,
I met a man who was not there.
He was not there again today.
Oh, how I wish he'd go away.

—*English Nursery Rhyme*

Meaning makes a great many things enduring—perhaps everything. —*Carl Jung*

I step into the day; I step into myself; I step into the mystery. —*Anishabe prayer*

Good morning and welcome to Bellingham Unitarian Fellowship. I'm Rev Paul Beckel.

When we encounter losses in our lives—even losses of deep significance—we ordinarily have an opportunity to move through a period of grieving and emotional healing. The grieving may be difficult, but it is expected to end. But with certain kinds of losses the grieving never seems to end—or perhaps it never even gets started—when the relationship has changed, but is not completely over.

For example: when a parent has Alzheimer's disease; when we divorce; when a partner is over-committed to work; when we move far away from loved ones; when a friend has a progressive disability; when a child is given up for adoption.... In these and so many other situations we find ourselves confronted by the physical OR the psychological absence of a loved-one...but not both.

We talk about these difficult realities because we aspire to grow...knowing that growth is not always about changing our external circumstances. So thank you today for being here for one another and invite you to say our covenant, as we light the chalice: Love is the spirit of this fellowship and service gives it life. Celebrating our diversity, and joined by a quest for truth, we work for peace, and honor all creation. This is our covenant.

GATHERING SONG *No Longer Forward nor Behind #9*

CHILDREN'S FOCUS *There's No Such Thing as a Dragon*, by Jack Kent

Summary: a child discovers a dragon in his room. It starts small but grows each time its existence is denied...growing to the point that it ends up carrying the house down the street.

REFLECTIONS

“Unambiguous Loss,” Tom Villa-Lovoz

Summary: Tom spoke of his mother’s unconditional love for him, and the profound and unambiguous loss he experienced with her death. He remembered especially her early-morning phone calls each birthday, in which she sang to him the traditional Mexican birthday song which concludes: I will pull two stars from the sky for you. One to say hello, and one to say goodbye.

REFLECTIONS

Tom just told us a poignant story about grieving for his mother. He carries still a sweet sorrow, and yet it feels to me that—since death and loss are a part of life—this was a good ending. And unambiguous; this is how it’s “supposed to be.”

Today I would like to address the difficult reality of "ambiguous loss," a subject that probably touches every one of our lives in some way. Even if you are not experiencing ambiguous loss directly, you are undoubtedly in a position to be supportive of someone who is. And this is no easy task. Ambiguous loss occurs when something or someone important falls out of our lives...but not completely out.

When someone is physically present but emotionally absent, such as a sibling with dementia. Or when someone is emotionally present, but physically absent, such as when I lost custody of my son Jonathan (who was then a toddler...and is now turning 28).

Based on my own experience, I can certainly affirm the devastating effects of ambiguous loss. Loss accompanied by little or no support for the process of grieving. Loss which largely goes unnamed, and leaves us thinking that there is something wrong with us for feeling as badly as we do... for being emotionally stuck... for not being able to get on with our lives.

I would like to say up-front that we will be wading into difficult emotional territory today. But I bring this to you confident that by naming and bringing to light those losses that appear to be unresolvable... losses with no foreseeable end... that some healing can begin.

Please know that beyond raising these difficult issues, I will also offer some emotionally healthy ways to approach such losses, and some spiritual reflections about finding meaning in the midst of absurdity and the apparent unfairness of fate. And as always, you should know that BUF’s trained pastoral care ministers are available to talk with you about any transitions in your life, even those that might seem to be long long past.

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In cases of ambiguous loss we have difficulty entering and following-through a healthy grieving process for a number of reasons. First of all, it’s hard to put a finger on just what we have lost versus what we haven’t lost. For example, one out of three American families is touched by Alzheimer’s disease. And yet when a partner is afflicted, who can accurately describe the reality with which we are confronted? For there are two (simultaneously contradictory) realities: my mother is standing right there; and: that’s not my mother.

And if it is hard to recognize *for ourselves* the nature of our own ambiguous losses, it's even harder to describe that reality—and the depth of our loss—to other people. There are few rituals to publicly or even privately acknowledge such a loss. And even when one has the courage to make a decisive move, and make such an acknowledgement (for example to have a funeral for a missing child) other family members will hold different perspectives, different expectations...and needs. So family conflict is almost inevitable.

Sustaining ourselves through life's trials is a matter of hope. To seek closure on an ambiguous loss can seem like giving-up hope. So when one family member elects to pursue the necessary process of letting-go, another family member will interpret this as giving-up. What if both are right?

The main reason that ambiguous loss resists concrete solutions is that, by nature, it continues. Sometimes for years, or even for a lifetime. Closure appears impossible when major elements of the story remain untold.

Whether we are conscious of it or not, ambiguous loss can diminish our effectiveness in our day-to-day lives. It will certainly inhibit our search for inner peace...and may precipitate a spiritual crisis. The stress may cause somatic symptoms—such as headaches, back pain, and sleeplessness. It may inhibit our growth in relationships, in spirit, in our ongoing quest for learning. Unresolved grief in one part of our life may keep us from taking action in other areas.

Glen Campbell performed a song on this topic while he was in the early stages of Alzheimer's disease. Called *I'm not Gonna Miss You*, this song gives us still another terribly poignant perspective: from inside the mind of someone who is leaving, but not going away. But before Don sings this for us, let's take a little time for personal reflection.

We come together on Sunday mornings in order to be fully aware and grateful for what we have. But courage for reflection, and clarity on what we have are not always easy to find. So as we enter now into a time of silence I encourage you to identify any questions that may be stirring within. Rainer Maria Rilke writes:

Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart—
Try to love the questions themselves—
Do not now seek the answers,
Which cannot be given because
You would not be able to live them.
And the point is, to live everything.
Live the questions now.
Perhaps you will then
Gradually,
Without knowing it,
Live along some distant day
Into the answers.

SILENCE

MUSICAL MEDITATION *I'm Not Gonna Miss You*, by Julian Raymond/Glen Campbell

I'm still here, but yet I'm gone
I don't play guitar or sing my songs
They never defined who I am
The man that loves you 'til the end

You're the last person I will love
You're the last face I will recall
And best of all, I'm not gonna miss you
Not gonna miss you

I'm never gonna hold you like I did
Or say I love you to the kids
You're never gonna see it in my eyes
It's not gonna hurt me when you cry

I'm never gonna know what you go through
All the things I say or do
All the hurt and all the pain
One thing selfishly remains

I'm not gonna miss you
I'm not gonna miss you

REFLECTIONS

Rabbi Harold Kushner speaks of the apparent absurdity of fate in his book, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. Kushner believes in a loving God, but he refutes the idea that the unfolding of time is all part of God's beneficent plan. Nor does he believe that everything that happens is the result of a complex system of cosmic justice, where we get what we deserve in life.

When confronted with losses it may be natural to ask, "Why did this happen to me?" "What did I do to deserve it?" But ultimately, says Kushner, these questions remain unanswerable, and pointless. The only meaningful question is this: "Now that this has happened to me, what am I going to do about it?"

He offers an example of Martin Gray, a survivor of the Holocaust, who after the war "rebuilt his life, became successful, married, and raised a family.... Then one day, his wife and children were killed when a forest fire ravaged their home.... Gray was distraught, pushed almost to the breaking point by this added tragedy. People urged him to demand an inquiry into what caused the fire, but instead he chose to put his resources into a movement to protect nature from future fires. He explained that an inquiry, an investigation, would focus only on the past, on issues of pain and sorrow and blame. He wanted to focus on the future."

In the face of any loss we would do well to find meaning in it. This is particularly hard to do in the face of ambiguous loss. But if only in a limited fashion, it can be done. We can act to transform and bring just a little more justice and predictability to the chaos. And in our acts, we can find some healing.

The most acute personal experience that I have had with ambiguous loss—and healing from it—was the loss of custody of my son when I was divorced. It's complicated, of course, and the passage of time has dulled the agony. But I mention it now, after all these years, because, when you're in the vortex, it's all too easy to think you're the only one. So I want you to know that you are not alone. There are countless variations on this theme, and no two people's experiences will match up identically. But maybe because there are countless variations on this theme, I notice it in your stories, again and again, when as a smart strong resilient person—you find yourself in that crazy wrestling match between what is and what seems to be...between what makes sense and what feels real...when the categories of tomorrow and yesterday don't distinguish themselves properly...when what should be and what is remain continually out of focus.

Rabbi Kushner, who lost a son to a progressive childhood illness, writes, "I would forego all the spiritual growth and depth which has come my way because of [my experience], and be what I was 15 years ago, an average rabbi, an indifferent counselor, helping some people and unable to help others, and the father of a bright, happy boy. But I cannot choose."

There is a heart-achingly similar emotional dynamic that takes place in the novel, *The Deep End of the Ocean*. In this case Beth, the mother of the abducted child, has understandably been emotionally paralyzed. But after weeks and months of this she is confronted by a loving friend ...who reminds her that it is not helping anything to zone out, to withdraw from the world, and to stop mothering her other children. "It's not a trade, Beth. I've told you this. If you give everything else up, it doesn't mean that you get [your] Ben [back]. If that was the way it worked, I'd tell you to do it."

Ambiguous loss confronts us with our utter helplessness—not just the perception of helplessness, but real helplessness. It waves in our faces the reality that we are often unable to choose our circumstances. But even in the face of this we have the opportunity to respond. How can we find the strength to do so? How can we respond as our best selves?

If it is any comfort to know, Rabbi Kushner suggests that even God is more or less helpless. God did not sit idly by and watch the horrors of the Holocaust or even our day-to-day cruelties because God has an exalted scheme to carry out, nor because God takes a long-view on justice. Rather, God is limited by the realities of natural law and human free will. The power of God, as Kushner sees it, is not in the making things happen, but in the being with us through it all.

Whether we think of God as a loving supernatural being or as a poetic description of our highest human aspirations, whatever our views of God, I think we can appreciate Kushner's sentiment that neither hurricanes nor holocausts are intentional acts of God. But the human responses to these...our human responses can be acts of God.

If we can somehow forgive God this helplessness (if we can forgive reality its apparent ruthlessness) we may be able to begin to move forward. In a perfect world, we might imagine that our losses would be bearable, that we could gracefully move through them to find closure and new beginnings.

But this is not a perfect world, and the conditions of our lives that we are called to accept are neither rational, predictable, nor fair. Still, in the unfolding of time (two steps forward, one step back), we have the option of responding to the imperfections of life, and to the imperfections of each other, with genuine love. Not the love that admires perfection and closure, but the love of an imperfect god, an imperfect reality, our imperfect selves, because this love and acceptance reflects our best selves.

The universe unfolds so slowly, it seems, the universe unfolds so slowly...that our losses may stretch beyond the bounds with which we could ordinarily cope. Moving through ambiguous loss may be a matter of forgiving the universe for unfolding so slowly, rather than all at once. Our task may be to respond to this unfolding by acknowledging what has passed, accepting what we cannot change, and freely loving, for no good reason, the imperfections that remain.

SHARING OUR GIFTS

SENDING SONG

Just as Long as I Have Breath #6