



COVENANT GROUP SPIRITUAL THEME GUIDE: LOSS

All Souls Church Unitarian, May 2014

On Personal Loss and Purpose

Years ago after the death of my family I visited briefly with the well-known minister, Dr. Norman Vincent Peale. After listening to my story of loss with great kindness, he stated that my primary challenge was to discover the purpose of my life. I responded that I'd lost my life's purpose when my husband and daughter were killed. He replied very gently, "That was the purpose you wanted, but life itself has a greater purpose." His words were enormous then, and remain so today. Beyond our personal wants and needs, and past our points of view, is the preciousness of life itself, and its potential and possibility. In the end I came to understand that life isn't a series of events. It's the deep summons of love in all our hearts.

Paula D'Arcy, *Red Bird Foundation Newsletter*

Paula D'Arcy, a writer, retreat leader, and conference and seminar speaker, travels widely in the United States, Canada, and abroad. She is also president of the Red Bird Foundation, which supports the growth and spiritual development of those in need and furthers a ministry both to those in prison and those living in third world or disadvantaged cultures. Paula's ministry grew from personal tragedy. In 1975 she survived a drunk-driving accident, which took the lives of her husband and 21-year-old daughter. Pregnant at the time, Paula survived the accident to give birth to a second daughter, Beth Starr.

Learn From Difficulties

First, we can learn to recognize that the difficulty is our path instead of trying to escape from it. This is a radical yet necessary change in our perspective. When uncomfortable things happen to us, we rarely want to have anything to do with them. We might respond with the belief "Things shouldn't be this way" or "Life shouldn't be so messy." Who says? Who says that life shouldn't be a mess? When life is not fitting our expectations of how it's supposed to be, we usually try to change it to fit our expectations. But the key to practice is not to try to change our life but to change our relationship to our expectations — to learn to see whatever is happening as our path.

Our difficulties are not obstacles to the path; they are the path itself. They are opportunities to awaken. Can we learn what it means to welcome an unwanted situation, with its sense of groundlessness, as a wake-up call? Can we look at it as a signal that there is something here to be learned? Can we allow it to penetrate our hearts? By learning to do this, we are taking the first step toward learning what it means to open to life as it is. We are

learning what it means to be willing to be with whatever life presents us. Even when we don't like it, we understand that this difficulty is our practice, our path, our life.

Second, when hardship strikes, we can learn not to point the finger of blame — at another person, at ourselves, at an institution, or even at life itself — and instead turn our attention inward. When we're in distress, this is often one of the hardest things to do, because we so want to defend ourselves. We so want to be right. But it is much more helpful to look at what we ourselves have brought to the situation — beliefs, expectations, requirements, and cravings. Then we might gradually come to understand that whenever we're having an emotional reaction, it's a signal that we have some belief system in place that we haven't yet looked at deeply enough. With practice this understanding gradually becomes our basic orientation.

Ezra Bayda, *Being Zen: Bringing Meditation to Life*

To a Daughter Leaving Home

When I taught you	of your crash as I
at eight to ride	sprinted to catch up,
a bicycle, loping along	while you grew
beside you	smaller, more breakable
as you wobbled away	with distance,
on two round wheels,	pumping, pumping
my own mouth rounding	for your life, screaming
in surprise when you pulled	with laughter,
ahead down the curved	the hair flapping
path of the park,	behind you like a
I kept waiting	handkerchief waving
for the thud	goodbye.

Linda Pastan

On having had a stroke

Before the stroke, I was on a very spiritual plane. I ignored my body, took it for granted. When I look at my life, I see that I wanted to be free of the physical plane, the psychological plane, and when I got free of those, I didn't want to go anywhere near them. But the stroke reminded me that I had a body and a brain that I had to honor them. The stroke has given me another way to serve people. It lets me feel more deeply the pain of others; to

help them know by example that ultimately, whatever happens, no harm can come. “Death is perfectly safe,” I like to say.

Ram Dass

When Things Go Wrong

Carolyn Myss, the medical intuitive who writes and lectures about why people don't heal, flew to Russia a few years ago to give some lectures. Everything that could go wrong did — flights were cancelled or overbooked, connections missed, her reserved room at the hotel given to someone else. She kept trying to be a good sport, but finally, two mornings later, on the train to her conference on healing, she began to whine at the man sitting beside her how infuriating her journey had been thus far.

It turned out that this man worked for the Dalai Lama. And he said — gently — that they believe when a lot of things start going wrong all at once, it is to protect something big and lovely that is trying to get itself born — and this something needs for you to be distracted so that it can be born as perfectly as possible.

Annie LaMott, *Traveling Mercies*

Poem

There's a thread you follow. It goes among
things that change. But it doesn't change.
People wonder about what you are pursuing.
You have to explain about the thread.
But it is hard for others to see.
While you hold it you can't get lost.
Tragedies happen; people get hurt
or die; and you suffer and get old.
Nothing you do can stop time's unfolding.
You don't ever let go of the thread.

William Stafford

Seeing Beyond Depression (excerpt)

Jean Vanier's elegant and hopeful book on depression proclaims that crisis can set us free. Here is a passage on the spiritual practice of hope.

When an activity or a person fills our lives, inspires us or gives us a zest for life, their absence can plunge us into this feeling of total emptiness. We live a kind of inner death. Life no longer flows forth in us. We are filled with a sense of loss and of grief; a heaviness, which resembles depression, permeates our whole being. This pain and this heaviness are not a sickness but a normal, natural reaction to a loss that touches the very meaning of our lives.

Many people find that a simple physical tapping of the grief point produces a balance of energy in this area of the chest that encourages a deeper surrender into compassion. There evolves an increasing trust in the process.

Tapping the heart is a powerful technique for getting through levels of numbness and unfinished business; it draws awareness and, thus, healing into that area. It encourages a merciful connection with the blockages to the heart, a shedding of our slowly accumulated armoring composed of layer after layer of disappointment and unresolved vulnerabilities.

Many people walk around most of their lives with holes in the center of their chests. By tapping the heart, we harmonize with the rhythm of the universe.

The area around the heart point may be numb. Numbness is not a sign of lack but, rather, of presence. Inside most numbness is a considerable amount of sensation. As the heart is retrieved, there may arise an increasing intensity of sensation in the grief point as it is slowly cleared by the heart breath and a tapping of resources to reveal the touch point of the heart.

Jean Vanier

Beautiful and Rare

Beautiful are the youth whose rich emotions flash and burn,
whose lithe bodies filled with energy and grace sway in their happy dance of life;
and beautiful likewise are the mature who have learned compassion and patience,
charity and wisdom, though they be rarer far than beautiful youth.

But most beautiful and most rare is a gracious old age
which has drawn from life the skill to take its varied strands:

the harsh advance of age, the pang of grief, the passing of dear friends, the loss of strength,
and with fresh insight weave them into a rich and gracious pattern all its own.

This is the greatest skill of all,
to take the bitter with the sweet and make it beautiful,
to take the whole of life in all its moods, its strengths and weaknesses,
and of the whole make one great and celestial harmony.

Robert Terry Weston

When we learn how to say goodbye, we truly learn how to say to ourselves and others: “Go, God be with you. I entrust you to God. The God of strength, courage, comfort, hope, love, is with you. The God who promises to wipe away all tears will hold you close and will fill your emptiness. Let go and be free to move on.”

Joyce Rupp, *Praying Our Goodbyes*

Separation

Your absence has gone through me
Like thread through a needle.
Everything I do is stitched with its color.

W.S. Merwin

FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. How has loss affected your life? Describe one of your experiences.
2. How do you bear your losses? Have you gotten better through the years, or does the cumulative weight make for a more difficult challenge?
3. Share an experience that was a “good loss” – like the little girl learning to ride her bike alone.
4. Can we help each other bear losses? Do we have a faith that helps? How does All Souls support our ability to move through loss?