

GETTING THROUGH HELL WITH AN OPEN HEART

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READING

This being human is a guest house  
Every morning a new arrival.

A joy, a depression, a meanness,  
some momentary awareness comes  
as an unexpected visitor.

Welcome and entertain them all!  
Even if they're a crowd of sorrows,  
who violently sweep your house  
empty of its furniture,  
still, treat each guest honorably.  
He may be clearing you out,  
for some new delight.

The dark thought, the shame, the malice,  
meet them at the door laughing,  
and invite them in.

Be grateful for whoever comes,  
because each has been sent  
as a guide from beyond.

Rumi

SERMON

As the leaves slowly change to yellows and oranges, they become suffused with the hue of autumn, or “spread over or through in the manner of fluid or light” as defined by Merriam-Webster Dictionary. The

earthy colors associated with the season, from amber to crimson, tinge and saturate the foliage of fall. So too do the gusty winds that flush our cheeks with a ruddy tint. Take a moment this month to appreciate the broad palette of October and fall's brimming, suffusive sense of color. "(from the monthly newsletter at Summerville at Farm Pond)

I read this in the newsletter at the Assisted Living Place where my mother resides since last Thursday: a place that does its level best to find ways to bring peace and comfort and connection and joy to people who are gradually (or less gradually) losing the way they used to be. The time when they didn't need to be "assisted" in their living. When they could take a pill on their own at the right time instead of someone coming through the door unbidden to give it to them. .. when they could cook for themselves and others...when they could be trusted to drive and when they could assist others.

What strikes me when I am there is the "broad palette" of human emotions that are present: Joy and warmth and connection and compassion, to be sure. But loneliness, too, and grief ...so much grief at the many losses that one has endured (and is enduring) when an elder. ..

the many losses that are at the core of every life along with everything else.

"I wonder if I asked folks who have suffered the loss of a job, or of a baby, or the end of a marriage, or any number of losses, to stand up....how many bodies would rise? And when they did, some smiling uncomfortable, some silent and expressionless, what difference would it make for us to see them? Would it make a difference to know that there were none among us without loads of sorrow and struggle to carry, that no birds had escaped a few torn feathers, that no man or woman hadn't walked weak for a while. Could we perhaps go easier on each other and on ourselves if we agreed it is okay to suffer, but not okay to suffer alone? I hope so." (Rev. Vanessa Southern)

The title in your order of service says *Light Has its Way: the Way of Grief*. I change the title here and now to: *Going Through Hell With an Open Heart*.

This is a sermon about the emotional pain that grief can bring and the practice of surrendering to it....that is: teaching ourselves to let our pain "spread over and through us in the manner of fluid or light"...to let the pain of our grief suffuse our beings.

Wait a minute here, did you hear that correctly? Did I say that this sermon is an invitation to become drenched in your pain? Yes...that's it, that's what I said, that's what I am advocating. I am here with an invitation today for all of us to re-learn how we think about, talk about, respond to and experience the grief and pain of human living. I am even going to say that learning how to do this as individuals and creating relationships of companionship in the suffusing of ourselves with the more painful emotions has a direct link to the healing of the world. On this 'United Nations Sunday' I believe that changing how we manage our grief, our fear, and our despair is directly related to creating a more peaceful world.

We all know that there is loss and pain, grief and sorrow in life. There is no doubt that there is much to weep about, much that causes us to feel pain in our beings. And, we all know that there is connection and joy, love and beauty in life. There is no doubt that there is much for which to give thanks, much that causes us to feel pleasure in our beings. The problem I raise today is that we are addicted to one side of that existential coin. We are searching for sustained happiness and strength. We search on spiritual paths, in therapists offices, in drugs and alcohol, in staying busy. We are hoping that there might be some way, some path, some substance that will free us from the inevitable pain. We affirm pleasure as normal and desirable and have taught ourselves ways to avoid pain...seeing it as, somehow a failure, or a sign of weakness.

In her book Healing Through the Dark Emotions, Miriam Greenspan writes of “emotion phobia”: the tendency in western culture to avoid negative feelings. “Distracting ourselves from emotional pain may work well enough for most of our garden-variety displeasures, so long as life doesn’t slam us on the head. But sooner or later, we all get slammed. Your wife dies of cancer. You lose your job. Your child becomes ill. Memories surface of being sexually abused as a child. Your father dies...” (p. 3)

And we are human. And we are creatures that thrive connected in love to others. And, when there is loss, it is our human need for love that causes us grief with all of its attendant emotions. In our culture we are coached so very often to “have a stiff upper lip”, to “get a grip”, to “get a hold of yourself”, to “get tough”. Our bodies can reflect these stances. It stiffens and guards and controls and armors itself when we practice this way of dealing with our grief and pain. We can become practiced at enduring our pain, or denying it, or escaping through various assorted addictions. But, here’s the rub. In our closing off to these aspects of ourselves, in our jaw-clenching false merriment we become stiff people unavailable to vitality in our living.

Religion has been a key culprit in supporting the idea that deep feelings of pain at loss are somehow not reflective of a fully spiritual person...you can call it a “stiff upper lip” theology. Here is an excerpt from an account of one man’s attempt at being honest about his anger at the funeral of a very dear friend:

...”we sat through the early part of the service, and we perhaps heard the remarks and sentiment from the minister, Mr. Roichelieu. Then he called on me, and everything that I wanted to say about Emily, about her warmth and decency and flawless friendship and personal strength, all of it fled, and I was angry. There is no other word, I was just goddamned angry! Richellieu had done that standard number about the deceased going on to a better place that Emily was at peace at last, that we could take heart in the sure and certain knowledge that she was watching us from on high, and smiling at us. And, I began speaking, and I’m not sure exactly what I said, but it was something like this: it’s not seemly to speak harshly at the funeral of someone you loved, and who’s gone away, and you miss so much it squeezes your chest when you think about them. It’s not right to make a scene and cry about how it hurts when you ask that lost friend a question, and she’s not there to answer, as if the wind took her answer away, and if you listen hard enough you can still hear her voice receding, getting thinner and smaller and more transparent. We’re not supposed to do that. We’re supposed to reassure one another, and say dumb things like, “Well, she couldn’t have suffered much.” And I want to say things like that, because ceremonies like this are for the living and not the dead, because the dead are gone and cannot hear what we say, and I can’t even take any solace in that, because it isn’t a new thought. And the truth of it is, I can’t take any solace at all, because

Emily is dead. She's just gone, and we won't hear her cleverness again, and we won't see the way she gave that wry smile, as she turned half-away so you could enjoy what she'd said without having to worry about her reaction. No one allows us to be angry. It isn't fitting. It isn't seemly. But that's how I feel. I'm just pure and deeply angry that she's gone. That she died when her life was so good. That's cruel. And, in the compassion we try to show each other, we won't let ourselves scream at the world that is now minus a special part.

You can be angry! It will be a brief enough time before our daily measure softens the edges of memory, and Emily, and all that she was, and all the places in which she resided in our hearts will have closed over like the Red Sea, and we won't feel like being angry. We'll just be miserable, and lonely for her, and we'll never have taken the opportunity to let the stupid nasty world that took her know how much we miss her and how goddamned angry we are!

And I sit down, and I could feel that these people were angry, but not at Emily's death. They were angry because I hadn't played the game. And I felt awful, just awful, and I hung my head.

...and then the minister got up and gently but firmly debunked what I had said. With oleaginous sincerity, he told his flock the same fable all over again, pushing the philosophy of that particular House of God and House of Men.

When the ceremony ended, we ...stood alone for a time, and no one came to speak to us, except for one woman who approached us and, smiling as Richelieu had been smiling, advised us that Emily was above, and she hoped and prayed for us that we would be able to let the sun into our hearts. She meant well, but I wanted to slug her.

And we walked back to the car, and we got in and drove away to Redondo Beach; and there hasn't been a day since that I haven't thought about Emily and how much I miss her." (Harlan Ellison)

Going through hell with an open heart. Staying open to actually feeling what some call the "darker" emotions so that they can do the healing work they are meant to do. That's the thing. So that they can move on through and so that we can learn what they have to teach. So that we can stay in an open posture to the next and the next and the next ...not crumpled down in fear so that we won't feel our pain. In this posture, we begin to be in more pain because we are not feeling the original pain and we become closed to the life that it is living us now; anchored in the past.

And what does this have to do with United Nations Sunday? How does this emotion phobia hurt the world? We see over and over again examples of war and mayhem being visited on the earth because of unresolved grief...old hurts that are stuck in memory and concretized in story and that have not moved through to expression...to awareness...to forgiveness offered and received...."the world cries out for a balancing of its emotional ecology. We are called to see into the darkness of our brokenhearted world, to recover our capacity to feel and know with our hearts, and to act collectively, from this place of compassion. In harmonizing our culture's dissociative splits between head and heart, mind and body, spirit and nature, self-interest and the collective good, we come to an understanding of healing that goes beyond the individual and beyond the facile appeal of a spiritual bypass of the dark." (Greenspan, p.257)

“There will always be people who run from every kind of pain and suffering, just as there will always be religions that promise to put them to sleep. For those willing to stay awake, pain remains a reliable alter in the world, a place to discover that a life can be as full of meaning as it is of hurt. These two have never canceled each other out and I doubt they ever will, at least not until each of us...all of us together...find the way through”. (*An Alter In the World*, Barbara Brown Taylor, 172-173)

We make our grief soup slowly, trusting that fully feeling all of our human pain will bring nourishment that frees us to be more fully alive. That frees us to bring our talents to the healing of a grieving world. We make our soup regardless of what others think about the time and care it takes. We become somewhat wiser about the fact that this is the way that our lives become tastier...truer...freer in their movement toward living the life that we have left after a loss.

“Plato once said that pain restores order to the soul. Rumi said that it lops off the branches of indifference. Whatever else it does, pain offers an experience of being human that is elemental as birth, orgasm, love and death. Because it is so real, pain is an available antidote to unreality...not the medicine you would have chosen, but an effective one just the same. The next time you are in real pain, see how you feel about television shows, new appliances, a clean house, or your resume. Chances are that none of these will do anything for you. All that will do anything for you is some cool water, held out by someone who has stopped everything else in order to look after you. An extra blanket might also help, a dry pillow, the simple knowledge that there is someone in the house who might hear you if you cried. (Taylor, p. 173-74))

Let us, in our community of faith (faith in life’s vitality, faith in the sacred intent of the broad palette of our emotions when they are invited to move through our beings and connect in solidarity with others) go forth humbly making and sharing soup, bringing one another cool water and a blanket and not shutting our eyes to the cries of the world.

Rev. Kathleen Hepler 10/25/09

## CHILDRENS’ STORY

### GRIEF SOUP\*

Our topic today is a word called “grief”. Grief is the process we go through to as we adjust to the loss of anything or anyone important in our lives. This story says the process of grief is kind of like making a good

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\* Based on a book called *Tear Soup* by Pat Schwiebert and Chuck DeKlyen, adapted for children’s worship by Reverend Kathleen Hepler

soup. It is a story about the fact that everyone feels sad and lost at different times in their lives when they lose things or people they love. There are little losses like not getting a part in a play that you hoped you would....and big losses like when someone you love dies. Each one calls for the making of grief soup: a small pot or gigantic, depending.

This is a story about an old and somewhat wise woman, whose name is Grandy. Her beloved son is killed fighting in a war. There might not be a bigger loss than this in the entire world. Being old and somewhat wise, Grandy knows that she will have to make a huge pot of grief soup and that it will take some time....so she pulls out the biggest pot she can find. (GRANDY GETS THE BIG POT) And, she puts on an apron (PUTS ON APRON) because, being old and somewhat wise, she has learned that making Grief Soup can get messy. You are never sure what ingredient your heart will tell you to put in...and many unexpected feelings can pop up while you are cooking. Grandy has learned that the important thing is to listen to your heart and put in every ingredient there. ..and to take as long as you need to add and simmer and taste until you know it is done. Grief soup always takes longer than you think it will, or that others want it to.

The first thing she does is let herself cry. (START CRYING INTO A ONE CUP MEASURE) Sometimes she sobs. She cries quietly at odd moments and sometimes, when she is alone, she wails. (GRANDY ACTS OUT SMALL AND LARGE CRYING INTO A MEASURING CUP).

Grandy puts all of those tears in the pot as a base for her Grief Soup. This is often the first ingredient of Grief Soup...salty tears. (GRANDY PUTS THE TEARS IN THE POT AND STIRS THE POT.)

When she tastes the soup of tears it is bitter. (GRANDY TASTES AND MAKES A BITTER FACE) Because she is old and somewhat wise woman who has made other grief soups, she knows that the beginnings of Grief Soup often have bitterness, and that more ingredients will change that eventually.

Many memories of her son start to come to her, and she begins to add them to the soup. (GRANDY PUTS THINGS IN AS THEY ARE READ):

-She put in the memory of the moment of her son's birth and childhood and remembers how happy she was. (TEDDY BEAR IS STIRRED IN AND GRANDY SMILES)

- She puts in all the family holidays. (CHRISTMAS ORNAMENT IS STIRRED IN)

-She puts in all of the struggles and hard times she and her family have had together. (SHE HOLDS UP SEVERAL CIRCLES OF SAD FACES AND THEN STIRS THEM IN)

-She puts in all of her precious and not-so-precious memories. (STIRS IN LETTERS AND PICTURES) Her heart is full of love as she stirred in her memories. (SHOW THE HEART BEAT WITH YOUR HAND WHILE STIRRING) When she tastes the soup it is a lot less bitter with these ingredients. (GRANDY ACTS THIS OUT)

As they will, people come to Grandy's house to try and help. Some try to make her laugh. (FOUR PEOPLE COME FORWARD. A PERSON OPENS A JACK IN THE BOX IN GRAND'S FACE. GRANDY DOES NOT LAUGH) One brings her chocolates. (A PERSON GIVES HER CHOCOLATES.) Some fill the air with idle chatter. (A PERSON GOES "BLAH, BLAH, BLAH, BLAH, BLAH.") One person brings their recipe for Grief Soup. (A PERSON HANDS HER A RECIPE)

But, being old and somewhat wise, Grandy knows that many of these people are just plain uncomfortable with her grief and don't know how to taste her Grief Soup. So, she adds a little sugar for their good intentions, for she knows they have them. (GRANDY ADDS A LITTLE SUGAR AND STIRS IT IN)

One day Grandy's friend Midge comes by with a quart of "willingness to listen". (MIDGE POURS A QUART MEASURE WITH A BIG EAR ON IT INTO THE POT AND GRANDY STIRS IT.) This was exactly the right ingredient for Grandy's Grief Soup! (GRANDY SMILES AS SHE TASTES THE SOUP)

Now, Grandy goes to church during the time she is making her soup. She is actually mad at God because she has lost her son. Because she is old and somewhat wise, she knows that anger has to be an honored ingredient of a loss so big. ..so she throws it into the pot. (GRANDY LOOKS ANGRY AND SHAKES A RATTLE AND STIRS IT IN.) The soup starts to taste pretty darn good and she remembers that all of her feelings are necessary in order for the soup to do its holy work.

One day Grandy learns that her neighbor across the street is beginning to cook her own Grief Soup. She has lost someone too. Grandy decides to invite her and other Grief Cooks over for a "Special Grief Soup Gathering". (3 PEOPLE COME TO THE SOUP POT WITH A CUP OF THEIR SOUP TO OFFER AND SPOONS TO TASTE GRANDY'S SOUP AND BEGIN DOING SO) At this gathering it is ok to cry in your soup, to have second helpings and to share your recipe. Grandy realizes that elements of others soup could become an ingredient in hers. And her soup starts to smell really yummy with all of that sharing.

One day, after a year, Grandy's grandson, Chester, comes to her house very curious about Grief Soup. (CHESTER AND GRANDY SIT AND FACE ONE ANOTHER AND ACT OUT THE NARRATION) "What does mean to make Grief Soup, Grandy?" he asked. Grandy told him this: (PUT HAND ON CHESTER'S SHOULDER AND ACT OUT NARRATION) "Grief is like a pot of soup. It changes the longer it simmers and the more things you put into it. I've learned that it is important to keep cooking until every ingredient your heart tells you to taste is in it. I've learned, most importantly, that Grief Soup (even though it can be hard work, even though I cried a lot, even though it took longer than anyone wanted), I learned that Grief Soup nourished me and taught me that I would survive and that in grieving what was gone, I could begin to give thanks for what I have not lost! Like you! (GRANDY AND CHESTER HUG) Chester asks her if she is done making the soup. She tells him that none of us actually ever finish altogether, but the hard work of making this particular batch was almost done. She put some in the freezer and told her grandson that she would take some out from time to time to have a little taste because sometimes we need to taste it again. Then she shares the ingredients of her Grief Soup with her grandson:

-Cups of tears

-One heart willing to stay open

-a dash of bitters

- bunch of fellow grief soup cooks

-a smidgen of good intentions

-quarts of listening

-a lot of patience

-season with memories

And, that's the story of an old and somewhat wise woman named Grandy and the making of Grief Soup.