



*The Unitarian Church in Westport*

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## **SERVICE TRANSCRIPT:**

### ***Pilgrimage of Love and Loss***

*By Tom Hearne*

*Sunday, August 15, 2021*

**CHALICE LIGHTING:** We light this chalice to remind us of the light that burns within ourselves, and others - and to remind us of our connection to one another.

**OPENING WORDS** – Today we journey together – in this time, in this moment, we are on a common bus, thinking the journey will never end. Listen now to the poem ‘Kindness’ by Naomi Shihab Nye:

Before you know what kindness really is, you must lose things,  
feel the future dissolve in a moment  
like salt in a weakened broth.  
What you held in your hand,  
what you counted and carefully saved,  
all this must go **so you know**  
**how desolate the landscape can be**  
**between the regions of kindness.**  
How you ride and ride  
thinking the bus will never stop,  
the passengers eating maize and chicken will stare out the window forever.

Before you learn the tender gravity of kindness you must travel where the Indian in a white  
poncho  
lies dead by the side of the road.  
You must see how this could be you,  
how he too was someone  
who journeyed through the night with plans and the simple breath that kept him alive.

Before you know kindness as the deepest thing inside,  
you must know sorrow as the other deepest thing.  
You must wake up with sorrow.  
**You must speak to it till your voice**  
**catches the thread of all sorrows**  
**and you see the size of the cloth.**  
Then it is only kindness that makes sense anymore,  
only kindness that ties your shoes  
and sends you out into the day to gaze at bread,

only kindness that raises its head  
 from the crowd of the world to say  
**It is I you have been looking for,**  
 and then goes with you everywhere  
 like a shadow or a friend.

## **STATEMENT OF AFFIRMATION**

*Love is the spirit of this church, and service its law.  
 This is our great covenant: to dwell together in peace,  
 To seek the truth in love, and to help one another.*

## **Preparation for Candle Lighting**

Richard R. Niebuhr writes:

"Pilgrims are persons in motion - passing through territories  
 not their own —  
 Seeking something we might call completion or perhaps the  
 word clarity will do as well,  
 A goal to which only the spirit's compass points the way."

- Most of us accept the idea that learning how to walk with love is a lifelong journey – be it with a person, a community, Nature, or the world. The walk with grief and sorrow is just as varied, just as nuanced. It is also a lifelong journey.
- It is tempting to think of these journeys as distinct and separate - one or the other: but, as Naomi Shihab Nye writes in her poem, they are intimately connected – to know one we must know the other!
- Love and Loss, viewed as one journey is a Pilgrimage – a journey of the heart, a journey which we take with the people we meet along the way. Today we walk together. I am truly grateful for your companionship today... and always!
- My prayer is that our walk today will offer some perspective on the journey - and that we can create a safe place for both grief and loving kindness in our own lives and in those we care for.

A few months ago, Berta and I decided to part ways. It was both a shock and a blessing: the shock of change (15 years coming to an end), the blessing of knowing in our hearts that the change was the best for each of us. Yet this knowledge does not change the fact that it was and is a loss. Something to be held, pondered, and grieved. Some of the grieving we were able to share as she packed to leave. Some of the grieving continues. Love and loss.

Have you noticed how few emotions have an associated verb? There is no sadding, no joying, no angering, for example. We do have loving and grieving. These are actions, processes – complex and mysterious – worthy of a lifetime, worthy of a pilgrimage. Our culture accepts

and promotes many aspects of love and allows for a great number of objects for love: people, animals, aspects of nature: from a quiet beach to purple mountains majesty to a walk in the woods...but not so much with grieving. Grieving is circumscribed in every way: what we can grieve, how long we can grieve, how we grieve.

How can this be so? Let me put it bluntly: everything you love, you will lose – no exceptions. Let me say it again: everything we love, we will lose – no exceptions. A person, a place, a home, a job, a relationship, your health, your life – all will be lost at some point.

So why limit our ability to process loss? Why do we hide from it? Avoid it? Even deny it? For every love, there will be a loss. Maybe not today, but some day. This is life. This is the mystery.

The journey, the pilgrimage, is the ongoing ways in which we respond to this reality. One of the ways that we can respond is by written and verbal acknowledgement.

- Denise Levertov writes: “To speak of sorrow works upon it moves it from its crouched place barring the way to and from the soul's hall.”
- So let us work on it! Take a moment to close your eyes. Take three long slow breaths – in and out. We hold each other here. Now, we take the time to let your heart speak.
- *What sorrows are heavy on your heart?* In other words, what are you grieving *right now?*

We will take 5 minutes. The act of *writing* is important! Please use the materials at your seat.

**CANDLE LIGHTING.** Today we will dwell a little longer on the Candle Lighting. Please share the topics of your grief (not the story!), if you are comfortable. If a joy or gratitude came up for you as well, please share!

**Remember:** A grief shared is a grief diminished. A joy shared is a joy multiplied!

## **HYMN – 18 What Wondrous Love**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sbTGmX4BITE>

What wondrous love is this, O my soul, O my soul.  
What wondrous love is this that brings my heart such bliss,  
and takes away the pain of my soul.

When I was sinking down, sinking down, sinking down,  
when I was sinking down beneath my sorrows ground,  
friends to me gather'd round, O my soul.

To love and to all friends I will sing, I will sing.  
To love and to all friends who pain and sorrow mend,  
with thanks unto the end, O my soul.

**Sermon:**

What a contrast: the expressions of grief on the one hand and the song of hope and love on the other! We sing “When I was sinking down beneath my sorrows ground, friends to me gathered round!”

Is the heart big enough to hold both love and sorrow at the same time, my dear friends? You know that it is! But perhaps it’s worth exploring, as we walk together.

For many of us (including myself for most of my 65 years), the pursuit of happiness defined my life: **more** joy, love, hope and **less** sorrow, pain and despair **equals** more happiness. Why does this simple equation, shouted from the rooftops in every commercial advertisement not work?

For me, the answer came from taking a closer look at what I was trying to avoid: GRIEF.

Francis Weller describes grief as a Well...

### The Well

“What do we find there in the well of grief?

Darkness, moistness that turns our eyes wet and our faces into streams of tears.

We find the bodies of forgotten ancestors, abandoned dreams, ancient remnants of trees and animals—

Things that have come before and that have the power to lead us to the place to which each of us will return one day when we, too, leave this life.

This descent is a passage into what we are, creatures of earth.”

The well includes several sources of loss or ‘gates’ of grief.

Weller identifies 5 such gates in his writing. All are in some way connected to love and loss.

Gate One – the loss of someone or something that we love.

When we acknowledge this Gate of grief, we again acknowledge that everything we love, we will lose. No exceptions:

Every relationship, every job, every career, every possession, every pet, our health, our socio-economic status--everything that matters to us, we will someday lose.

This is the only gate our culture recognizes, and yet it is often minimized -- and almost always given a time limit.

If you’re lucky: Bereavement leave. Then: Get over it. Move on.

After a year, you should be done with it. Otherwise, you’re “stuck” in your grief and will get depressed and less able to function. Strong people move on after a certain time. Weak people can’t move on.

**Still**, this gate of grief is allowed by the culture.

The next 4 gates are not recognized. In fact, if you talk about them as legitimate forms of grief, you may be shamed. These other gates are **often more chronic than acute**: a pain that won't go away, rather than a stab to the heart. Even when there is nothing you can name that is weighing on your heart, these other gates may offer clues.

Gate Two – The places within us that have never known acceptance, let alone love.

- Carl Jung calls these parts of ourselves the unconscious ‘Shadow’— aspects of our lives that are repressed or denied – that are not available to the conscious mind.
- The Shadow aspects of our psyche are places that have not been accepted, they **have never known love - from ourselves or from others.**
- **They are a loss, and a source of grief**

Gate Three – The Sorrows of the Earth

- I grieve the loss of fish in the rivers, birds that used to fill the air, even the many insects that filled a field or forest of my youth in Indiana. I grieve for mountains that no longer bear snow and glaciers year-round. Each of us has experienced the losses differently.
- What if part of our anguish is the living world expressing its grief – the loss of balance, the loss of diverse life, all loss – through us? What if this is the *anima mundi*, the soul of the world, weeping through us?
- The Sorrows of the Earth include those of humanity: hunger, homelessness, racism, war. Without recognizing the grief there is only anger, with limited capacity for compassion...

Gate Four – What we expected and did not receive

- We use the expression “It takes a village” – this is not just about raising a child. A container in which we are loved and nurtured through all life's stages is our birthright. We expect it at the soul level, but we do not receive it. It is a great, often unnamed loss.
- Weller points to “the expectations coded into our physical and psychic lives” due to our ancestors evolving for at least 200,000 years in relational environments and societies.

Gate Five – Ancestral Grief

- Some grief we carry in our bodies is from sorrows experienced by our ancestors. There is no way that we can ever be separate from the wounds of our forebearers--even if we don't know what the wounds were.
- The entire Torah is a history of the Jewish people. The Vedas are stories of the peoples of the Indian Subcontinent. Many religious texts serve (among other uses) as an expression of ancestral grief. But how do we process this grief today?
- Western culture has lost the tradition of honoring our ancestors by telling and retelling their stories – both good and bad, but the wounds of the past still are passed on in the form of racism, bigotry, and other forms of anger and hatred.

**Let us turn now to processing grief. And as we do so, I confess that I am no expert. As noted in a Firesign Theatre sketch: ‘...we’re all bozos on this bus’!**

**Let’s start with Rumi’s poem ‘The Guest House’**

The Guest House

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**

So...

How do we process loss? How do we grieve? **The same way we love: by being *present to it!***

- First, we recognize the loss: we name it. We accept the price of having loved.
- Second, we must build a safe container *within us*, giving us the courage to go through, rather than over or around, the sorrow.
  - Greet each ‘visitor’ to your door, as Rumi advises, remembering the adult observer - stepping outside your small self to become the adult who ‘greet each visitor’
  - Journaling – writing down our grief makes it tangible, allows us to see it change over time. Grief, like love is not static. It is ever changing.
- Third, we create a safe container *outside/around*: the need for a village: friends, counselors, church, etc.
- Fourth, we support our journey with Ritual: grief shared is grief diminished – think of our candle lighting each Sunday service.

- Fifth, find the right metaphor for you: I use the Pilgrimage metaphor – it’s the journey (the people, the experiences, the getting up and greeting every day), rather than the destination (feeling ‘fine’ being ‘over it’).
- There will ALWAYS be more grief – How could it be otherwise? Because there will always be love... and loss of what is loved.

### Two Deepest Things

In the opening words we heard the poem ‘Kindness’. The two ‘deepest things’ are kindness and sorrow. Compassion and grief. Love and loss. These things are at our core. When we talk about seeking meaning, it is these two things that is the basis of all our questions: Love and Loss.

“...Before you know kindness as the deepest thing inside, you must know sorrow as the other deepest thing.” Naomi Sahib Nye

Again, to ‘know’ these things we must be present, *fully present* to them.

In the symbolism of the Tau, the Yin and Yang (light and dark) each have a spot of the other...

Love/Joy/Light has within it a spot of Sorrow/Grief/Darkness

Sorrow/Grief/Dark has within it the thread of Love and Joy and light.

Each year at Christmas and Easter I play Handel’s Messiah – all of it. (I know it’s not kosher!) Throughout this beautiful story – full of hope, despair and rejoicing – I cry. I remember singing it with my father. I remember him. I mourn again his loss thirty years ago. What do my tears hold? Joy and sadness - sometimes separate, often mixed, sometimes indistinguishable.

A few weeks ago, Berta asked me to send all the pictures of her I had collected over the 15 years we were together. It was a project I dreaded at first, but the pictures brought back many happy memories. The bitter taste of loss was mixed with the honey of fond memory.

Kahlil Gibran writes:

“When you are sorrowful look again in your heart, and you shall see that in truth you are weeping for that which has been your delight.”

How do we find balance? How do we move on in our journey?  
What images come up?

## 1. Lake of Tears

When I lost my marriage and my three girls became estranged 20 years ago, I thought of my grief as a 'lake of tears' held by a dam.

If the dam should be opened, I was afraid that I would drown in the tears.

I was afraid to cry.

## 2. Sacred Lake

With the help of friends, therapy and community, I have come to believe that the lake is my sacred space – a collection of experiences filled with meaning:

It holds tears of sorrow AND tears of joy.

To hold back the expression of one is to hold back the experience of the other.

By reframing the lake, I no longer fear it.

How we think of life's tears -- the ups and downs -- It matters!

How to conclude?

- At the core of our being, at the core of our attempts to create or find meaning, is kindness and sorrow, compassion and grief, love and loss.
- The starting point for responding to loss is naming it, sharing it, accepting it, and being present to it – just as we must do with love: declare it (*I love you!*), share it, embrace it and be fully present to it.
- We recognize that we are bigger than the emotion of the moment when we remember our metaphors. We are: The welcoming presence in Rumi's Guest House. We are: Pilgrims taking each day as it comes – and walking in community.
- In deep grief there is a thread of joy – we must seek and hold onto that thread as we mourn.
- In great love and joy, there is the thread and threat of loss – we must hold onto that thread, as well, so that our love is grounded.
- Francis Weller says it this way "The work of the mature person is to carry grief in one hand and gratitude in the other and to be stretched large by them. How much sorrow can I hold? That's how much gratitude I can give. If I carry only grief, I'll bend toward cynicism and despair. If I have only gratitude, I'll become saccharine and won't develop much compassion for other people's suffering. Grief keeps the heart fluid and soft, which helps make compassion possible."

So may it be. Amen.

**OFFERING – Fire and Ashes**, by Tom Prasada-Rao

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=quYYBV1vh9s>

All that may happen, all that we've seen,  
 All of the lives, we've lived in between...  
 Is that all gone for good?  
 What are the chances...  
 What we lost in the fire; we'll find in the ashes?

Well, I had a dream; it was just me and you.  
 It was finally spring, and the world was brand new.  
 There were birds in the trees, and buds on the branches.  
 What we lost in the fire; can we find in the Ashes?

I've heard a blessing begins as a curse.  
 Often impossible to see it at first.  
 We're at our best when we're faced with the worst.  
 Sometimes...

So who would've guessed we'd be facing this?  
 But we are where we are, and it is what it is.  
 This too shall end, but until it all passes,  
 You know what they say about playing with matches.  
 What we lost in the fire; will we find in the ashes?

"What we lost in the fire, can we find in the ashes?"

## **Water of Tears Ritual**

I invite you to consider this quote from Joseph Campbell:

"A ritual is the enactment of a myth. By participating in the ritual, you are participating in the myth. And since myth is a projection of the depth wisdom of the psyche, by participating in a ritual, participating in the myth, you are being, as it were, put in accord with that wisdom, which is the wisdom that is inherent within you anyhow. Your consciousness is being reminded of the wisdom of your own life."

The lake of tears, the pilgrimage: these are myths, images, metaphors. If they resonate with you, touching your inner wisdom, then I invite you to join me in a closing ritual...

Please gather your Cup and Water Container.

- Your cup is your capacity for love and loss
- The water container is your lake, your reservoir, your sacred space.
- **The water is your life, distilled into tears.**

And so we begin...

1. For each grief, add your tears of sadness to the cup. (add to your cup)
2. For each love, add your tears of joy to the cup. (add to your cup)
3. We are all witness to these tears (our own and those in this gathering).
4. We celebrate the yin and yang of love and loss: tears of sadness and joy.
5. We welcome them as part of who we are – the bitter and the sweet. We drink them in.
6. We drink.

**Benediction:**

May we find what we lost in the ashes. And may our tears lift us to greater love... and sustain us in loss – And may our pilgrimage together open our hearts to the tears all around us.

SO MAY IT BE! AMEN!

**Please join in as we present the CLOSING HYMN/Postlude:** How can I Keep from Singing.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VLPP3XmYxXg>

My life flows on in endless song above earth's lamentation.  
I hear the real though far off hymn that hails a new creation.  
No storm can shake my inmost calm while to that rock I'm clinging.  
Since love prevails in heav'n and earth, how can I keep from singing!

While though the tempest round me roars, I know the truth, it liveth!  
And though the darkness round me grows, songs in the night it healeth!  
No storm can shake my inmost calm while to that rock I'm clinging.  
Since love prevails in heav'n and earth, how can I keep from singing!

I lift my eyes, the cloud grows thin, I see the blue above it.  
And day by day this pathway smooths, since first I learned to love it,  
No storm can shake my inmost calm I hear the music ringing.  
It sounds an echo in my soul. How can I keep from singing!

How can I keep from singing? (x6)

Keep singing!

Keep singing!