

In the Companionship of Grief

Sermon by Reverend Rebecca M. Bryan

February 5, 2023

I had avoided the office for some time, choosing to work in the meditation room instead of in my home office, from which I had led the congregation through COVID.

I knew I was avoiding my office, but I ignored the niggling sense that something was incomplete. "I just want a change of pace," I said to myself. Little did I know that it was grief I was avoiding. In avoiding my home office, I was eluding the loss that was held there.

For eighteen months, plus another two months later on, I ministered to you over a screen. We held staff meetings, an annual congregational meeting, board meetings, and more all online and all with me in my home office. The church building was closed except on the Sundays when I came to preach from the sanctuary. Preaching in the sanctuary along with television cables and blank screens, I had to imagine you. I could only guess how you were responding to what I was saying.

Many of you were devoted in your engagement with the congregation through those years. Some of you even discovered us during that time. Others of you drifted or stopped coming as much or coming at all, finding virtual worship lacking or different. I wanted to scream "*Don't leave. Come back. We can do this. I can't do this alone. We need one another. I need you. I'm a person too.*" At the same time, I understood. How could I blame you and still I miss you, miss us, so much?

When we regathered in person in the fall of 2022, I unconsciously did all I could to push that pain and grief away. "Don't make this about you, Reverend Rebecca. Stop feeling sorry for yourself; look what others have had to go through." I separated myself from the loss and carried on.

But back at home, I avoided that office, the space where we "did" church together throughout the pandemic.

Then, at the start of this year, my husband retired and offered me the bigger office space in our home. "You should have it. I'll move into the smaller office space," he said. I was grateful for the change and knew it would be good for me.

I also knew I needed to thank the space that had

served as my office before I could change spaces. I know the power of rituals so I thought thanking the space would allow me to feel complete and move on.

One morning two weeks ago, aware that I had been avoiding the space, I opened the door to my home office. Georgia O'Keeffe's red and yellow-orange print hung on the wall. The blue chalice given to me decades ago by another congregation stood underneath it. The sun streamed into the small window, and the cold air condensed into dew, fogging the lower windowpanes.

I knelt on the ground and began to offer thanks for all that had happened in that space. The tears started, rivers of tears. As did happy and difficult memories, which came rushing back. I remained there until the release was complete, saying "thank you" again and again. After that and now that I have shared it with you, I am complete.

"Sorrow is a sustained note in the song of being alive...Acknowledging this reality enables us to find our way into the grace that lies hidden in sorrow,"¹ writes Francis Weller.

Comparison has no place in sorrow. Thinking it does keeps us from sharing it with one another. As long as I thought my pain was unjustified, it remained stuck inside of me.

When we think grief is bestowed unfairly on some people, we either feel guilty for our good fortune, or we keep away from the grieving person, fearing it may be contagious. We know that the other's grief runs the risk of touching our own grief we have been trying to keep away.

Grief has been a lifelong companion of mine. I've come to honor her wisdom and treasure her gifts. Grief is part of life, to be embraced rather than feared. We grieve as deeply as we love.

I wish someone had taught me when I was younger how to be with grief and not let it overcome me. I am no longer afraid of the dark that often comes with grief and am at home in myself and my soul.

I hope to share some of that wisdom with you

1 Francis Weller, *The Wild Edge of Sorrow* (Berkeley, CA: North Adams Books, 2015), xix.

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today. Many of you know more than I. According to Francis Weller, those who have learned to apprentice to sorrow and appreciate the lessons of grief are the elders. We have much to offer. These have been difficult lessons. Yet, the happiest people I know are those who know how to grieve.

I was stuck in disenfranchised grief for decades. It showed up as depression, feeling numb and disconnected from joy. I knew nothing better. I had none of the skills to navigate my grief, and I have forgiven myself. Michael Lerner writes, "...great loss is wasted if we do not use it, over time, to discover what lies beyond great loss."²

Perhaps my grief is more radical than yours; perhaps it is not. Regardless of its origin and depth, at some point, we can all learn to find the good embedded in the earth of life, the likeness of sorrow and joy. We must till the earth in our own garden.

Our monthly ministry theme is *grief*. You might be wondering why. To understand and realize the things that you have told me interest you most, things like peace, forgiveness, beauty, joy, theology, or community, requires that we know how to live with grief and process it, not as a one-time event to be endured, but as a part of life.

Much of today's sermon is based on the work of Francis Weller, author of *The Wild Edge of Sorrow*. He says this of grief:

*For the most part, grief is not a problem to be solved, but a deep encounter with an essential experience of being human. The lack of courtesy and compassion surrounding grief is astonishing, reflecting an underlying fear and mistrust of this basic human experience. We must restore the healing ground of grief. We must find the courage, once again, to walk its wild edge.*³

Grief is not something to be "gotten over." Grief is a messenger from our heart, a guide to what matters to us and a map through life's challenging and painful aspects. Contrary to what many of us are taught, grief is a friend of the soul. Grief work is soul work. It will lead us home to ourselves if

we have the skills to be in relationship with it. "Grief work offers us a trail leading back to the vitality that is our birthright," writes Weller.⁴

He outlines five gates of grief, not "stages of grief." The first is *Everything we love, we will lose*. These are the things people commonly think of when it comes to grief including the death of someone we love or the loss of something connected to our identity, such as our health, career, or marriage.

But grief doesn't stop there. The second gateway of grief includes *the places that have not known love*. These are the parts of ourselves or memories of which we are ashamed. They often show up as addictions, anxiety, or depression. Indigenous cultures call this soul loss. Carl Jung called these repressed or cutoff parts of ourselves complexes. Internal Family Systems calls them exiles.

Buddhist teachers Pema Chödrön and Thich Nhat Hanh say we must reclaim these parts of ourselves if we are to have peace. Weller writes "...it is in these outcasts, those parts of us that we have sent to the edges of awareness, that we will recover our true humanity."⁵

I have spent many years at this gate. I go deeper into myself each time I venture there and return with untold treasures.

The third of the five gates is *the sorrows of the world, or anima mundi*, the soul of the world. This is where we are invited to process the grief over devastating planetary losses, climate destruction, and social injustices. This is where our pain goes when Tyre Nichols is killed or another language or animal species is lost, never to spoken or seen again. We can be bearers of hope and good news only if we know how to process our grief. Unprocessed grief leaves us stuck in anger, overwhelm, or detachment.

I remember being with Joanna Macy at a week-long retreat in 2014. The information and communal rituals to help process grief were overwhelming to the point that I had to step away for large parts of the conference.

The last two gates of grief are *what we expected*

2 Weller, *The Wild Edge of Sorrow*, xiv.

3 Ibid, xix.

4 Ibid, xxii.

5 Ibid, 42.

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and did not receive and ancestral grief. The fourth gate is deeply connected to our sense of belonging or worthiness and our sense of having a purpose. "Hidden within this gate lies our diminished experience of who we truly are."⁶

The fifth gate, *Ancestral grief*, is the sorrow and unresolved loss we carry in our bodies from our ancestors. This includes our familial losses as well as those of the countries and people to which we are connected. This includes genocide and racism. The crimes of humanity are large.

Weller acknowledges that there are other gates of grief such as trauma: "Trauma always carries grief though not all grief carries trauma."⁷

Once we realize that grief is not something to get over or endure, we can be open to developing a new way of being in relationship with it. We can be open and curious rather than ashamed or afraid. We can use it to connect with our truest self and be present with others. We can allow our grief to equalize us, open us, and help us bond in our common humanity.

Creating a relationship with grief requires having space and patience, solitude and community, and support and rituals. The process is not to be hurried. It is not a 1-2-3 process. It is deep soul work and an essential part of spiritual community.

If there is sufficient interest, I will be offering a group that goes through Weller's book, using a curriculum developed with his support. The group, called *Interior Lands*, will meet monthly starting in March running through next winter, with a break for July and August. The group will use sharing, journaling, and other spiritual practices to explore each of the five stages of grief that Weller identifies. Please let me know if you are interested.

I will conclude with a ritual.

Each of you should have received a journal on entering the church. I invite you to use this throughout February. You may want to use it to journal, add photographs, or doodle. It is a container for your process this month.

Hold your journal in your hand. Place your

dominant hand over the bow and your non-dominant hand on top. Take a breath and close your eyes.

Bring to your mind the part of grief you want to explore this month. It may be a specific loss, one of the gates, or something else. Sit with this for a moment. Let it know you are interested in its gifts and in learning how to be with it. (pause)

As you are ready, gently untie your bow. To end with words of Francis Weller:

Grief...isn't there to take us hostage, but instead to reshape us in some fundamental way...capable of living in the creative tension between grief and gratitude.⁸ Every loss we experience in our lifetime has the capacity to deepen us, to widen the channel of soul life flowing into us.⁹

So may we move together. Amen and blessed be.

6 Ibid, 58.

7 Ibid, 70.

8 Ibid, xxiii.

9 Ibid, 126.