

April 15, 2007  
First Parish, Unitarian-Universalist, Needham MA  
The Rev. Gwen L. Buehrens

“Good Grief, Charlie Brown”

A couple from Minneapolis decided to go to Florida for a long weekend to thaw out during one particularly icy winter. They planned to stay at the very same hotel where they had spent their honeymoon 20 years ago. Because they both had jobs, they found it difficult coordinating their travel schedules. It was decided that the husband would fly to Florida on a Thursday, and his wife would follow him the next day. Upon arriving as planned, the husband checked into the hotel. In his room there was a computer, so he decided to send his wife an e-mail back in Minneapolis. However, he accidentally left out one letter in her address and sent the e-mail without realizing his error.

Meanwhile, in Houston, a new widow had just returned from her husband’s funeral. The dearly departed had been called home to glory following a sudden heart attack. The widow went to check her e-mail, expecting condolence messages from relatives and friends who had not been able to attend the service. Upon reading the first message, she fainted. The widow’s son rushed into the room, found his mother on the floor, and saw the computer screen which read:

To: My Loving Wife

Subject: I’ve arrived

I know you are surprised to hear from me. They have computers here now and you are allowed to send e-mails to your loved ones. I’ve just

arrived and have been checked in. I see that everything has been prepared for your arrival tomorrow.

Looking forward to seeing you then! Hope your journey is as uneventful as mine was.

P.S. Sure is hot down here!

....groan....good grief... what a laugh!

What a loss we all felt in 2000 when the creator of the comic strip, "Peanuts," Charles Schultz, died. It felt like losing a family of friends with Charlie Brown at the center. Thank God the cartoon strip is still in reruns in many papers.

Charlie Brown often utters the catch-phrase "good grief" when astonished or dismayed. In moments of extreme disappointment or despair he sometimes simply cries out, "I can't stand it!" Yet he struggles on, a child possessed of endless determination and hope, but whose life is frequently made more difficult by all his friends. Yet he never gives up.

Why have we been so captivated by this comic strip for almost 60 years? Perhaps it is because, as Umberto Eco has pointed out, Charlie Brown is invariably referred to by his full name, which follows a convention found in epic poetry giving Charlie Brown a sense of universal identification. I imagine that you, too, have had Charlie Brown moments...

On a more serious note, there is another universal experience which binds us all: the experience of grief. How to put words to it? Grief happens whenever we experience loss. It is part of the human condition. Each person goes through it uniquely. No one grieves exactly the same way as another person.

As Bill Coffin wrote, life is like a journey, a journey of many steps, with necessary changes/losses along the way. A child is born—a wonderful change, but her parents no longer sleep through the night. For the first time the little girl is allowed to go on her own to a nearby friend’s house. For her, she is gaining a first taste of independence; her mother, on the other hand, feels a twinge of loss—her daughter, for the first time, is on her own, however briefly.

For example, losing a job, growing up, a change in marital status, moving to a new home, for the first time not having your offspring coming home for Christmas, a friend dies, we get older-- each undoes our sense of equilibrium. We are thrown off balance.

Here’s a secret common to us all—we hate not being in control because it makes us feel vulnerable-- and who wants that?? As losses inevitably occur the longer we live, we find that our hearts have been pummeled or even broken, even as our hearts continue to beat.

How does our society teach us to deal with losses, with grief? How about in your own family now and years past? Did you or your family ever share your feelings,--or theirs-- or were you expected to keep a “stiff—and closed—upper lip? Where are—and were-- safe places to share your hurt, confusion, and sadness?

Let’s face it, when someone is actively grieving, his friends typically hope that “he’ll get over it” and life will go back to normal. But his loss has changed him forever; there will be no “normal” again. For some people, regaining one’s sense of emotional equilibrium can take a very long time.

As you know, I am a chaplain with West River Care—a hospice—and spend most of my time being with people who are dying. their families and friends, who themselves often feel that they are dying too.

It is a privilege and honor to have such a ministry because it is almost solely relational in nature. Gentle listening and caring touch are often more important than speaking. As our relationship develops, the fears and feelings of the patients and families are often shared; even while they are emotionally exhausted and sad,; each person is, at some level searching for meaning amidst it all And my role is to be a trusted companion along the way.

West River Care also offers bereavement support for the families, for their pain and loss typically continues unabated for some time Also, I often tell the families that losing a loved one is not only traumatic emotionally, it is also traumatic physically, and that they might well experience are common symptoms such as: aching bodies, sleeplessness or wanting to do nothing but sleep. stomach problems, heart palpitations, inability to concentrate or make the simplest decisions. These are all normal manifestations of grief.

Above all—and please remember these two points 1)—for the person facing the end of his or her life and for those facing the loss of a loved one and then afterwards, the biggest sense for all is one of isolation. Isolation. And, 2) Dealing with a current loss very often evokes painful memories of previous losses. No wonder people feel immobilized!

When a loved one has died, we often feel a sense of numbness, which is Mother Nature's way of protecting us from the total reality, so that we can continue to function at some basic level..

I was very interested to see a recent newspaper article stating that the most important and necessary part of the grieving process is one's yearning for the person who has died. I especially went through this when my mother died. I imagined that she was still with me, interested in all that was going on as well as calling me frequently, like she used to. She cooked with me,

read the same books, laughed at our long-loved jokes, and was simply delighted to be in my presence as I was delighted to be in hers.

These imaginations were my comforting reality. Nothing else seemed real or important. I was totally preoccupied, and needed to be in order to get used to the fact that, actually, she would, at some point, be gone..

When such yearning—and it could have gone on for quite a while—no longer seemed quite as necessary, I became depressed. The pining had not really brought my mother back. This depression pushed me down, down to the absolute truth: Mother was in my heart forever, but no longer physically present, and it was not going to change.

Slowly, actually it took a couple of years, I realized that my identity was not only “the daughter who has lost her mother,” but it also included that I was a wife, mother, friend. So I newly realized that only part of how I experienced myself included being a motherless daughter. . Life got back into balance, somehow. I had a newly integrated, expanded identity.

When you know someone who is grieving, be there as much as possible, emotionally and physically. You are giving the gift of yourself. Words are not as important as you think. Don't think that his or her grief has a time clock attached to it. For that person, there will never be a “normal” again.

In conclusion, let me share with you a time when I felt that my being physically and emotionally present was the most appropriate, loving witness I could offer.

Two years ago, when I was doing my chaplain residency at Hartford Hospital in Connecticut, I was the chaplain on call one evening when I was paged to go to the emergency department.

A nine-year old girl has been brought in. She had drowned in a pond north of the city.

Her parents, who had always been very protective of their two daughters, allowed them to spend the weekend with close friends of theirs who had daughters the same age. It was the first time their girls had slept away from home. The host family and their children, along with the two girls, had gone swimming that Saturday at a nearby pond. What fun!

In the course of their fun, the nine-year old girl dove into the water...and didn't come up. She had been rushed to Hartford Hospital and the ER staff did all they could to revive her. To no avail.

Her parents arrived, stunned, struck in agonizing fear, stuck in the horror of possibly losing their daughter. Yes,..... she was dead. How could this be??

A nurse, her mother, and I were standing in a small room where the body of the little girl lay on a table. Her mother, her head bent over in indescribable grief, then asked if she could hold her daughter in her arms. So the nurse and I put the little girl in the lap of her mother, who had sat down to receive her. And then she cried, and sobbed, and rocked the body of her dear, sweet child for a long time.

--- As in the "Pieta," Michaelangelo's sculpture of Mary's cradling the body of her beloved son, Jesus.---

Both, somehow sacred moments

No, none of us is in control; it's an illusion. But we are alive, sharing in the pain and sorrow of those who grieve. Our hearts may be broken too—and maybe more than once, but they are still beating. For this we are indeed grateful. May the encompassing love in our hearts be aware of those around us, for we certainly need each other. Good grief, Charlie Brown, it is so true.

AMEN

Reading from “Death is More Friend Than Foe” by William Sloane Coffin

I want to talk about death, but not because I am feeling morbid, sad, or even old. “Old to me is when you get into your rocking chair and have trouble getting it started. “Old” is when you get winded playing checkers. “Old” is when the only glint in your eye comes from the sun hitting your trifocals just right. No, I want to talk of death because it is good, from time to time, to contemplate the end towards which, with irreversible steps, we all walk.

In the first place, death is not the enemy we generally make it out to be. Consider only the alternative, life without death. Life without death would be interminable—literally, figuratively. We’d take days just to get out of bed, weeks to decide what to do next. Students would never graduate, and church meetings and all kinds of other meetings would go on for months.

Chances are, we’d be as bored as the ancient Greek gods and up to their same silly tricks. Death cannot be the enemy if it is death that brings us to life. You can see what I’m after: just as without leave-taking, there can be no arrival; just as without growing old, there can be no growing up; just as without tears, no laughter; so without death there could be no living.

**“Healing Harvest”** by Dennis and Matthew Linn

O memory of a painful time,  
are you seed or stone?  
A dark and deadly tomb,  
Or seed with life to bloom?  
Only if we say, “we want you,”  
Will we really know.

O sprouting seed, are you angry  
At the dark and choking dirt?  
What grates your tender shoot  
And blocks your chosen route?  
Only if we say, “we forgive you,”  
Will we really know.

O tender shoot, are you bargaining,  
Demanding sun before you grow?  
Or would you rather as the sun  
Pour warm love on everyone?  
Only if we say “we forgive you first,”  
Will we really know.

O roots, do you wander depressed  
Searching in drought for tears?  
Or do you need more sun  
To dry the tears that run?  
Only if we say, “Forgive us,”  
Will we really know.

O golden wheat, can you accept  
The gifts of pulsing seed?  
Are you wheat or golden bread?  
Are you bread or God instead?  
Only if we say, “Thank you,”  
Will we really know.

Unless a grain of wheat  
Falls into the earth and dies,  
It remains alone:  
But if it dies,  
It bears much fruit. (John 12:24)