

A lawyer stood up to test him. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to win life eternal?" Jesus said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" He then answered, "You shall love the Holy One, your God, with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and you shall love your neighbor as yourself." Jesus said, "You have answered rightly; do this, and you will have life."

But wanting to justify himself, he then asked Jesus, "And just who is my neighbor?" Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. No by chance a priest was on that road; and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while traveling came near him, and when he saw him, he was moved with compassion. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, 'Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.' Now which of these three, do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said, "Go then and do likewise."

Like some dreams, they appear, then reappear,
 cloistered in the space of their own wounding,
 their public mourning, their gravity's gray coat.
 Even at a distance, as if drawn by being seen,
 they come straight at you, the almost-elegant woman
 in the aisle, the tall young bird-like silent
 weeping man. And no one need have died, no one
 you know, to know their voices and half-faces,
 the scent of the spirit passing, for whom blood
 on the door or blessing means nothing. But, then,
 everyone died or didn't, who calls to you in sleep
 after your back is turned. In the parable,
 like the dream, you're all the characters,
 though come the day, in real life, you must choose.

WHAT TO DO WITH GRIEF

A Sermon Delivered at First Parish in Needham

Sunday, August 14, 2011

The Rev. John A. Buehrens, Minister

A couple are in Europe together, as Gwen and I were earlier this summer. One evening toward the end of the trip they are musing about the places they liked most. "You know, dear," one says to the other, "I think that if one of us were to die, I might just move to Paris."

Last month I read David McCullough's newest book, about Americans who, even before they died, did move to Paris, and were changed there. Toward the end, there's a poignant scene in which the Boston writer William Dean Howells is at a garden party given by the painter, James McNeil Whistler. He is standing alone, uncharacteristically downcast. He has just gotten word that he must return home. His father is dying.

Sensing something wrong, a younger American comes over to speak to him. Suddenly, Howell turns and puts his hand on the younger man's shoulder, saying, "Oh, you are young, you're young. Be glad of it and live. Live all you can. It's a mistake not to. It doesn't matter what you do, but live. This place makes it all come over me. I see it now. I haven't done so. Now I'm old and it's too late. It's gone past me. I've lost it. You have time. You're young. Live!"

Years later, that young man, Jonathan Sturges, told that story to novelist Henry James, stressing the intensity with which Howells had spoken his grief over having failed to live fully. It became the germ of a novel James set in Paris called *The Ambassadors*, in which the main character has a similar outburst.

I think this is why poet Mary Oliver writes, "When it's over, I want to say: all my life I was a bride married to amazement./ I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms. When it is over, I don't want to wonder/ if I have made of my life something particular, and real. I don't want to find myself sighing and frightened,/ or full of argument. I don't want to end up simply having visited this world."

But to live fully, I've learned, one must learn what to do with grief. Perhaps it's one reason Gwen and I both went into ministry. When I was a boy, I lived in ten different houses and went to ten different schools before I was sixteen. Gwen went to five different high schools in four different countries. Building enduring community became important for me. Dealing with grief well, for us both. Along the way, it's often been laypeople who have shown us the way.

Some times people who have long since died visit us in our thoughts and dreams. Last weekend, for example, I was in San Francisco, to conduct a memorial service for an old friend. But in my dream the night before, I was visited by my friend David Johnstone. He was still in his 30s, an editor in New York, a husband and father of two, when, on a trip to San Francisco, as he walked back to his hotel after dinner with one of his authors, he was robbed and shot by a 13 year old boy. Some good Samaritan got help quickly enough that David survived, although the bullet had cut his spinal cord, low. In a few weeks he was back in New York, starting rehab, when I paid a pastoral call. David was full of determination to have a full life, despite paraplegia. Rather than rage at the young man who been arrested, David expressed grief for his wasted life. Then a few days after I saw him, he suddenly threw a blood clot from his legs, and died.

As Stanly Plumly writes, “In the parable,/ like the dream, you’re all the characters, though come the day, in real life, you must choose.”

In other words, when grief strikes, am I just the victim, feeling mugged by life? Or am I perhaps also the passing priest or Levite, going “Tsk, tsk. Ain’t it awful!” while hurrying on. Or am I capable of stopping, paying attention, helping, and turning grief to empathy for others.

At David’s memorial service, over twenty years ago now, I told a Muslim parable. According to this *hadith*, a man came to the Prophet saying, “My mother has died; what must I do for the sake of her soul?” The Prophet looked at the panting heat of the desert and replied, “Dig a well, that the thirsty may have water to drink; and then say to yourself, ‘This I have done for the sake of my mother.’”

David’s wife Tina responded accordingly. She began to network with other women who had lost loved ones to the epidemic of gun violence in America. Together they planned a protest in Washington, DC. They assembled thousands of pairs of empty shoes – men’s shoes, women’s shoes, teenagers’ shoes, baby shoes, one for each person killed that year by a gun in America. The total was over 40,000. Then they brought the shoes to Washington and placed them all around the Reflecting Pool, between the Washington Monument and the Capitol. They became organizers of the Million Mom March against Gun Violence, putting those empty shoes on the desks of members of Congress who, scared of the NRA, promote easy access to firearms. I spoke at their big DC rally. It helped my own grief, even though the political tide to this day still favors the crazy idea that, to reduce violence, everyone should have a gun. And how’s that workin’ out?

As I've often said at memorial services, grief is something we each experience all alone. But there is no solution to the individual pain of grief in individualism. Jesus did *not* say, "Blessed are those who *grieve*," but rather, "Blessed are those who mourn" – which is what we do when we share our grief – "for they shall be comforted."

There's a Buddhist parable that comes to mind. A young child has died. The grieving mother clutches the dead baby to her breast and will not let go. She keeps seeking someone who will revive the child, who has medicine or magic. Finally she comes to the Buddha. "Help me!" she screams. "I will," the Buddha replies, "but to do so, to fashion the medicine, you must bring me a few grains of rice from a household in which no one has ever suffered, grieved, or died." The woman goes from house to house, all about, asking "Has anyone ever died or grieved here?" "Oh, yes," is the answer at every door. She returns to the Buddha, still desperate, the child still in her arms. "There is no house that has not known death or suffering or grief." The Buddha looks at her with compassion, but says nothing. He extends his arms. She at last relinquished the body of the child for burial.

A few years ago a colleague of mine in ministry went through a similar deep grief. Marlin Lavanhar is Minister at All Souls Unitarian Church in Tulsa. Five years ago, when and his wife Anitra were young parents, still in their thirties, their three-year old daughter Sienna suddenly and inexplicably died, just three days after her third birthday. Some unseen congenital anomaly had ended her young life. The shock was so deep that, as Marlin has confessed to me, for a time he feared that their immobilizing grief might dissolve both his ministry and marriage.

But then, through a sequence of events almost as inexplicable as Sienna's death, his father Martin and his brother Derek proposed something he and others might do as a response to such a deep, unexpected loss. Martin's UU congregation in Ridgewood, NJ, where Marlin and Derek both grew up, had just started raising some funds for an educational human rights project. Derek lives in Guatemala, working as a builder. There he's learned to speak not only Spanish, but also Quiche, the language of the Mayan people, who've suffered many human rights abuses. If Sienna herself would never be able to go to school, they reasoned, what about building schools for some Mayan children who might otherwise never get a chance to go to a school?

"What must I do to win life eternal?" asks the lawyer in Luke's parable of the Good Samaritan. Others may hear that question differently, but I do not hear the response as being

about winning immortality, or even fame. Rather its about promoting life, more abundant life, and not just for one's self, but for others in the human family, even after our own lives are over.

So the Sienna Project began. I think of it as an equivalent to digging a well in the desert. So far five schools have been built, each in a village where there either was no school or where another one was clearly needed. Five more are planned. The village provides the land; Guatemala's government funds the teachers for each co-educational classroom. Derek developed a low-maintenance, sturdy, pre-fab model village school. Villagers do the prep and finish work. Gringo UU volunteers raise the funds for the materials -- about \$20K per three room school -- then come to work a week, at their own expense, helping Derek and Martin and the villagers put up the basic structure.. The most recent school, in the Mayan market town of Chichicastenango, is for disabled children. It is only the second such school in the entire country.

In the five years since the Sienna Project began, Marlin's congregation in Tulsa has become the largest UU church in the country, as well as one of the most racially diverse. Meanwhile, UU congregations in New Jersey and Colorado and elsewhere have sent teams to build schools. After talking to Marlin, I decided to lead such a team myself -- this February, during school vacation week. I invite you to consider coming along. Nine more volunteers are needed. Ask me for details after the service.

But one doesn't have to travel or build schools to choose to play a different and more constructive part in the parable of grief. Not just the victim. Not just the passersby. There are plenty of opportunities to stop and pay deeper attention -- not only to the grief of this world, but also to its beauty and unending possibilities.

"When we remember those whom we have known and loved and lost," prayed the great Unitarian minister A. Powell Davies, "help us to remember also how great a gift is human loving -- and that not to have known or loved at all would have been loss far greater still."

Grief is a lonely, painful process, but where it is meant to arrive is in deepened gratitude - - gratitude for gift of life itself, even in all its brevity and fragility; deepened determination to live one's one life more fully, in whatever time remains. The "life eternal" is not so much a life that goes on after we are gone as a life lived, here and now, with deeper attention to what Buddhists call The Great Compassion, is calling to all of us -- in the still, small voice of our own grieving and that of others in the whole wide world around us -- calling us to the service of Life itself, and of life more abundant, for ourselves and for others.

“I tell you this,” writes Mary Oliver again, “to break your heart/ by which I mean only that it break open and never close again/to the rest of the world.”

“For to live in this world, you must be able to do three things: to love what is mortal; to hold it/ against your bones knowing/ your own life depends on it;/ and, when the time comes to let it go, to let it go.”

May we learn to grieve, so that we and others, may have life, and life more abundant.

Amen.