

I'll Pray For You

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Why does it help to know that others are praying for you? It doesn't take away the pain or the loss. It doesn't make it all right again.

This being human, this being human together.... How do we do this living, this living together? It's a mystery and its wondrous. Paul uses the metaphor the body of Christ to talk about our interdependence, our connectedness. He writes: "If one member suffers, all suffer together with it. If one member is honored, all rejoice together." He believes this of God, this wondrous mystery, that God is creating a people, building a community, that God is the love in and through it all.

Sometimes it feels, especially when you read the news, like individualism, (another high value in our culture—it has its place) is running amok, weakening and undermining bonds and communal relations, disconnecting us from our communities of meaning and purpose. This hyper individualism, often in the name of freedom, is like a virus, spreading and killing us. Literally now. To not mask and not become vaccinated, if you are eligible, is not about me, or you, it's not about the individual: It's about the collective body. Especially now about the least of these, young children who are not yet able to be vaccinated.

Paul's right. If one member suffers, all suffer together. If one member is honored, all rejoice together. Maybe we need now in our country, a declaration of interdependence...

Mayflower, I'm finding my voice again after a very difficult time, and on this sabbath day that I want to give a personal testimonial... I do this not because it's all about me. I do this because I believe that in the particular is the universal. That my experience or parts of it will resonate deeply with your own experience.

So here's my testimonial on this Gathering Sunday 2021.

I believe in the church more than ever.

Now I know what it is.

Now I **know**, even though I've spent 30 years working in the church.

Now, I know.

I witnessed, through the depth of the pandemic, all the ways you cared for one another oh church; the ways you tried to hold on to one another... care calls, care cards... The learning communities and choirs, for many of you, have been at the heart of it, have *been* church for you... And I trust that you who are more quiet, introverted, on the margins still felt the gentle pull of this Body of Christ, through online worship, through those daily messages, hearing the whisper.... "we got you" and "you are not alone"...

And now I know.

My father died on Feb 28th. One month later, my spouse, out of the blue, stroked massively, not once but twice in two days. And two months after that, my mother died.

I've experienced life concentrate in the last half a year. (Many of you have had similar experiences...) And I **know** you "got me".

Why does it mean so much to know this?

Why does knowing that people are praying for you mean so much? I confess I don't know how prayer works. In my younger days I would even cringe when someone said it to me..."I'll pray for you"... It seemed too anti intellectual, too Jesus cheesy, too trite. And it could very well be that my understanding of this word "prayer" is very different from those who offer to pray for me. I've spent 30 years reflecting on it. My first sabbatical was all about unpacking this word prayer. I find Larry Turners definition as good as any. "The heart needs to express itself", Larry says. So why was it that being held in prayer, through prayerways, during worship, in your hearts during the last five months meant so much to me?

And those meals your brought to my home? I understand the choir organized that... You set them in the cooler just near the gate to my back yard, rather than knocking on the front door, giving me privacy, a chance to keep my emotional energy for myself and my family. The food nourished us when we didn't have the energy to buy or make food. It delighted us. It was delicious! And it evoked tears as we would say our table grace and think of you who prepared it for us with love. You know tears always tell the truth. It was a different kind of communion, this kind of a sharing a meal. *Why* was this so meaningful to my family, to me?

And the cards... why did they mean so much?

I had a special basket placed in a special spot in our home that filled with cards after my father died. Then another basket was places right next to it after Gus stroked to receive all of the care cards. And then a third basket two months later, after my mother died. We'd open them, and read them, more tears, so much kindness.. Emails, phone messages, the words "praying for you"... And those who didn't write, I just know, I feel it, you've been bearing my burdens with me these last many months.

Why does this mean so much?

And gifts! And special toasts! And the lawn mowing services, enough already... it's okay now...

Why does it all mean so much?

And I have a vivid memory of three bear hugs from this time period. I don't remember **ever** having felt the power of hugs so much in my entire life. Remember back in June when it felt like it had lifted and we were gathering as adults, indoors, unmasked, hugging... after ascertaining the others were vaccinated. We were giddy. Some call it collective effervescence. (Durkheim article) It was at a stewardship team end of the year gathering, and one of you pulled me in for a big hug and my eyes welled up with tears. And up North this summer, a nephew rounded the corner of the porch, not saying anything but just going in for a big, long hug. A week later, a different nephew, from the other side of the family, bounded out of the cabin and just dove in for a big hug, no words.... I'll never forget these three hugs. I know we need to be more careful, once again, about hugging, for a little while longer, we can do this... but still I wonder, **why do hugs mean so much?**

As a theologically liberal Christian, non creedal to the core, I'm choosing the words carefully here, using the phrase "why does it mean so much?" The word mean, as in "gives us meaning" Dare I use the word "save", as in salvation? Why do prayers, meals, cards, hugs **save** us in this good but hard life?

It's a great mystery.

Sometimes hearing stories from other cultures or religions help us understand our own religion, our *own* culture better. It can help us see what is invisible to us.

In last week's Sunday Times magazine David Treuer, who wrote a book I've referenced a lot in the last year, highly recommend it to you: The Heartbeat of Wounded Knee. Treuer is enrolled with the Leech Lake band of Ojibway. He shares, generously I believe, his testimonial about his own life and the ceremony that means so much to him, "The Big Drum". Treuer's life was falling apart, as he says, a lot of death and divorce. You must read this article, not skim it, in its fullness, in its multi layered richness.

"At its most basic level, the Big Drum is quite literally a big drum, originally made out of a hollowed-out tree trunk but subsequently out of barrels cut in half, with a raw hide stretched over the open ends, painted, decorated. It is also a ceremony (made up mostly of singing, talking, eating, and dancing) and it is a society (made up of people from the community in which the drum sits). Big Drum exists to heal people from physical, psychological and social pain and grief."

Veterans are the people in the community who hold the central positions in the ceremony.

*“Among their duties is to put families who have suffered a tragic loss into mourning and to, at the right time, take them out of it. The thinking is that only veterans—those who have risked themselves in combat, those who carry the grief of their own losses as much as the agony they feel at having taken lives—truly understand the meaning, the terrible weight, of life and death. And they are the only ones who can help us heal from it. **There’s something to it...**”*
Treuer writes.

“There’s a process that sometimes occurs (not always or even often) during the Big Drum to help end a family’s mourning called “wash their tears.” Typically, men will wash up men, and women will wash up women. I’ve seen Jim do this many times over the years. A family is seated in chars near the drum, and the veterans approach them with bowls of water and soap and combs. They literally wash the faces of the bereaved, and comb and braid their hair. These big men, with their strong hands, wash and comb with a delicacy you wouldn’t think possible. In so doing, they wash away our sadness. Even though Jim hasn’t washed me up, I’ve always felt a kind of calm fall over me when I’ve seen him help others with their grief. My breath comes easier....”

Treuer talk about Joe, another big drum Vietnam Vet, who spends half his weekends at a drum. Joe says: “There’s two words we use a lot at drum (two Anishinaabe words that I’m not going to try to say) that mean: “Let’s help each other. And let’s care for each other.”

But ultimately, even after experiencing and stepping back and doing research and reflecting, Treuer still doesn’t understand why the drum means so much to him. He talks about the feelings that come over him. He says: “When Joe dances, I feel that he can see me, he can see all of us and all our troubles... he can carry our grief...”

David Treuer, I kind of get it... I’ve been in the church all my life. I still don’t know why the Christian practices, rituals, and traditions mean so much to me. I just know the tears, and that tears always tell the truth. I’m getting older, 61 now, and I know it like I’ve never known it before.

We are interdependent. We are one body. Yes, we have work to do healing the body of the earth, healing the body of our nation and of our city. All are interdependent and we have work to do and we will. Today, we honor this body of Christ, this community, this church, and this wondrous but ultimately mysterious interdependence.

I suppose someday, if they’ve not already done so, scientists will measure and explain this mystery, or try to... of why it means so much.... No matter. We’ll just keep doing our communion thing! The prayers, the meals, the cards, the hugs...

I swam a lot in the Lake this past month, immersed in the same water that we blessed our parents beloved bodies with after they died, before they were turned to dust. I floated in the water. In May, one of you wrote me a card with these words: Now I offer these beautiful words to you, you who are hurting...

“What difficult waters you are in these days! It seems to me that only metaphors speak the truth about devastating loss. So, I hope that you are held afloat by all who love you. I hope you can lie on your back, and be completely open, as you float wherever the waves push you and find you are still buoyant. Still held in the arms of the Spirit.”

At the end of the funeral for my parents up North, small, with just family, after we had scattered the ashes around the cabin and on the path and down to dock, and into the water, we played Iris Dement, singing... Let the Mystery Be...

Sources

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Treuer, David, “The Ceremony”, The New York Times Magazine, September 5, 2021.

Winkie, Luke, “I Was Euphoric in June. Look Where We Are Now.” New York Times, Sept 4, 2021

