

Transforming Sorrow Into Compassion
John 19, portions of
March 5, 2023

How do we live with such sorrow?

We are in this season of Lent when we go deeply inward to do our soul work and today we're reflecting on sorrow and grief.

Aren't you in awe of the human being? How we love so deeply—our friend, our child, our spouse, our parent, our sibling, our pet—knowing that one day our hearts will be broken? How do we live with this knowledge, but even more, how do we continue to live after it happens?... after they die....

In another life I'd be a cultural anthropologist. I so want to learn from all of you and then weave our collective wisdom into sermons. Our holy book, our tradition, helps us but it's our shared life wisdom from our *own* lives, that is the best teacher. We teach one another how to live and how to die. There's so much grief and sorrow in the bodies here in this sanctuary this morning and so much wisdom.

This is part of the answer, a big part. I suspect. How do we live with such sorrow? By being in community, and not alone. In grief, in sorrow, we may want to burrow down and isolate, but we must resist this deep urge. Receiving the most basic, simple, communal gestures... it's like manna in the desert. The cards, the hotdishes, the bread, the prayer shawl, the prayers, the kind gaze, the hug, the ride to church....

One of you just introduced me to the wisdom of Francis Weller who reminds us human beings were shaped to digest grief in community, not privately. Too many of us are trying to cope individually with what is always meant to be carried communally. Psychically we're not wired for this. It takes a village.

And a village of all ages... oh the elders, those who are lucky enough to live 3 score and ten and more... Many have become fluent in grief. They don't turn away from the sorrow of the world. They turn and face *into* the wind. Courageously they are willing to digest the grief and to talk about it. And they are willing to be in the world, a living example of how to continue to choose life even when your heart has broken, your beloved had died. Could it be that grief is not just a dreaded, private emotion but that it is a core human skill?

And the children can teach the community how to do this living and dying too. I knew a girl whose beloved grandfather died when she was ten. She went with her family back to the city where her grandfather and other relatives lived. She had never been to a funeral before and so wasn't trained in the quiet, decent, restrained grieving of this now, third generation

American culture. Instead, she wept loudly, like those in other cultures do?, like those in ancient cultures did? and maybe like those in grandfathers homeland in Eastern Europe still do?. Were people around her embarrassed? Perhaps. But could it be that through her untamed, undomesticated grief there was an affirmation of life? Again in the words of Francis Weller, “grief is subversive, undermining the quiet agreement to behave and be in control of our emotions. It is an act of protest that declares our refusal to live small and numb. There is something feral about grief, something outside the ordained and sanctioned behaviors of our culture. Contrary to our fears, grief is necessary to the vitality of the soul. Grief is suffused with life force. Not a state of deadness or emotional flatness. Truly it is an emotion that arises from the soul. “

People often say of Mayflower, with admiration, when they visit: “This is really a singing church”. Sometimes, rarely, I respond we are also a “crying church”. Crying (and even weeping) is as important as laughing and singing in this sanctuary, in this our communal container for the soul. This space we’re in, and also the chapel, “becomes a grief ritual space, a ritual container in which to collectively weep our tears and sing our sorrows. To turn our private suffering into a communal cup of loss”. (Weller)

How do we live with such sorrow? We wonder... in community, intergenerationally, and, as humans have done forever, with a special place and special rituals. On Wednesday, ashes, “remember you are dust and to dust you shall return”... and today, the bread of life... Oh these symbols, songs, rituals, seasons of the faith like Lent... they usher us into this mystery we call life and help us live with the sorrow.

This morning we heard part of the story of the dying and death of Mary’s son, the last five, six, and seven Sorrows of Mary. At risk of appropriating another religious tradition, Catholicism, let us open ourselves to their wisdom. Notice the two different images of Mary on the bulletins. (You may need to look at your neighbor’s bulletin...) Mary holding her dead son (the Pieta) and Mary with her bleeding heart. Was Mary’s deep sorrow transformed, over time, into compassion, her heart broken and bleeding, not just for herself, but for the entire world? If we are communal creatures rather than just individuals, might our solitary sorrows, if they don’t harden our heart with bitterness or exhaustion, break open our heart into a greater love for the world?

Let us not valorize suffering, believing that somehow we must suffer to gain God’s love or God somehow wills this suffering.... Let us not glorify suffering, but let us wonder if God is able to turn our suffering into compassion.

Julian of Norwich shares this wisdom: Suffering can crush and destroy the human spirit. But paradoxically, it is through suffering that profound compassion is born. Suffering can

destroy us, but it can also carve out a depth in which beauty, compassion and intimate love are born.

A more modern contemplative, Jan Richardson, writes after the sudden death of her husband at a relatively young age... she writes: "Because I do not know any medicine for grief but to let ourselves grieve... Because I do not know any cure for sorrow, but to let ourselves sorrow... Because I do not know any remedy but to let the heart break, to let it fall open, then to let it fall open still more... Because I do not know any solace but to give ourselves into the love that will never cease to find us, that will never loose its hold on us...."

God is the love that will never cease to find us. God is the love of the community that holds us in prayer and bring us a hot dish. God is the healing love that keeps us going until we come alive again and can pour ourselves out in love for others who suffer.

Let us ever be in wonder, in awe, of the human heart and its extraordinary capacity to hold and transform the sorrows of life into a great stream of compassion.

Sources

Farley, Wendy, The Thirst of God: Contemplating God's Love with Three Women Mystics, Westminster Johnknox, 2015.

Richardson, Jan, The Cure For Sorrow, Wanton Gospeller Press, 2016

Weller, Francis, <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/mantalks-podcast/id1015078747?i=1000505646023> <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/mantalks-podcast/id1015078747?i=1000536730300>

[Jason Isbell and the 400 Unit - If We Were Vampires - YouTube](#)

And this additional gift: a poem by Mayflower member Jo Cassidy-Maloney
3-5-23

a confession for this Lenten season

i spend too much time
(does anyone else?)
(does everyone else?)
in the center of my chest,
that place i keep my terror
locked away,
the terror of mortality,

the horror of living,
the overwhelming panic
of the dawning realization
that death draws ever nearer
day by day.

i spend too much time
(does anyone else?)
(does everyone else?)
imagining the fatal future,
my own end that is
barreling down upon me
on the accelerated expressway
of life.

but even more,
i spend too much time
(does anyone else?)
(does everyone else?)
borrowing the burden of
the gargantuan grief
that will follow the fatalities
of those i love
and the crushing weight
of woe i will be forced to bear
day after weary day.

in this season of anguish and anticipation,
of destruction and resurrection,
of the plain promise of passion,
of terrific terror and heightened horror,
of courage and compassion,
of hope and grace,
let us all –
anyone and everyone –
meld dread and dismay
with the everlasting love
that is central to the faith
to which i cling.
amen.