

**Where All of Me Is Ancestor**  
**October 30, 2011**

Yesterday was a beautiful day. It was cool but sunny, breezy, but not biting. Beautiful. A beautiful day, in fact, to sit down with about sixteen other people, over in the fellowship hall, and talk for three hours about, of all things, grief: what grief is, the misconceptions we have about it, our personal experiences of it, how we move through it, and how important it is to find others who understand the journey of grief that we are on.

The event, hosted by the Wildflower Listening Ministry Team, was a rich experience of opening up our hearts, speaking, sometimes through tears, listening, being heard, discovering we were not alone. At the end of our time together, as we went around the room sharing our thoughts, one person recalled a story that goes something like this: A young mother was in despair because her only child had just died. The woman carried her child through the village asking her neighbors for medicine to bring the child back to life. The neighbors, worried that the young woman had lost her senses, sent her to the Buddha, who told her, "Bring me a handful of mustard seed from a family that has never experienced death, and I will bring your child back to life." The woman excitedly rushed out in search of such a family, and thus a handful of mustard seed to bring back to the

Buddha. But as she went from house to house, she gradually realized that there was no one free from death. Finally, in understanding that, she was able to accept the death of her child, and to see beyond her own despair.

In the depth of *our* own grief, whether we're grieving the death of a person or an animal, the loss of a relationship, a career, a place we have lived, or a certain age that is passing us by, it is challenging to see beyond our own despair, our own sorrow. Even if we manage to get done what needs to be done, everything is seen through the lens of our grief, and our bodies move slowly, heavily, burdened by the weight of our lives forever changed by our loss.

Relief comes not in finding the magic mustard seed. Because, as we all know, there is no such thing. Relief comes in finding that we all walk on common ground. It comes in discovering that loss is, indeed, a normal and natural part of life.

Now, by using words like normal and natural, I run the risk of doing exactly what can be most harmful in supporting someone moving through grief, and that is to minimize the significance of the pain that person is in. To send the message to someone grieving that since loss is normal, the degree to which they are grieving must *not* be normal is detrimental to the person's healing. Similarly, if someone is confronting a particularly

traumatic or violent loss, for someone else to say death is natural might imply something like this was “God’s will.” The lord giveth and the lord taketh away. Simple as that. But a parent, for instance, having lost a child to war or illness or a drunk driver, might rightfully protest, “No, God, / gaveth that child to the world. How dare you take her away.” So what I really mean when I say that loss is normal and natural is that it is *inevitable*. All of us must face it. And all of us must learn to practice the wisdom of Mary Oliver, who says,

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.

So much of grieving is exactly that: letting go of things as they were, letting change happen as it has happened. If there is trauma, or injustice in a loss, that letting go doesn’t mean we passively accept the *reason* for our loss. Groups like Military Families for Peace or Mothers Against Drunk Driving, for instance, strive to create meaning and change from their losses. Similarly, those in the Occupy Wall Street movement who have

most profoundly felt the blows of Wall Street's greed stand to both empower themselves and change unjust systems by letting their grief--their suffering, their anger, their very lives--be known. In all such situations, the act of letting go, as Mary Oliver calls us to do, strengthens us to accept the change we face, and to then move forward with our lives.

Still, those instructions from the poet can seem a bit jarring. "Hold what is mortal against my bones knowing my own life depends on it, and then, when the time comes to let it go, let it go? Just like that?" Where's the gentleness, where's the journey? How slowly are we allowed to let go? How incrementally?

Letting go, after all, is not always so simple as opening our hands, watching what or who we love drift away, and moving on with a clean slate on life. The poet Ignacio Garcia Cuevas reminds us of the long pull of grief, the journey of mourning when he writes,

It has been so long since I have seen her,  
It has been so long since I have visited her,  
Since the last day  
I went to her tomb  
To bring her flowers

Yesterday I took the long road  
To the cemetery

And I realized how profound  
And unforgettable is her memory.

Loss can be sudden, life or love can be torn from our grip, even without our willingness to let go. But grief can stay with us for years, and we so often feel tied to that which we have lost, even when we are so irreparably separated. That juxtaposition, that profound and simultaneous sense of connection and separation can bind us in a kind of existential exile.

How then can we possibly find peace? How can we once again see beauty? Enter the solace, the seam, one might say, of autumn. In autumn, letting go becomes not just about severance, but also, strangely, about reunion and integration. Listen again to the words of Annie Finch in her poem, "Samhain."

In the season leaves should love,  
Since it gives them leave to move  
Through the wind, towards the ground  
They were watching while they hung,  
Legend says there is a seam  
Stitching darkness like a name.

Now when dying grasses veil

Earth from the sky in one last pale  
Wave, as autumn dies to bring  
Winter back, and then the spring,  
We who die ourselves can peel  
Back another kind of veil...

The veil the speaker speaks of is the veil that for most of the year, separates her from the dead. But here, in the peeling season of autumn, she can reach through to where, as the poet says, "all of me is ancestor."

I move my hand and feel a touch  
move with me, and when I brush  
my own mind across another,  
I am with my mother's mother.  
Sure as footsteps in my waiting  
Self, I find her and she brings

Arms that carry answers for me,  
Intimate, a waiting bounty.

It is one thing to cling, to not be able to let go of or accept the parting of those people or things or phases of our lives we have lost. When we cannot let go, we live in the wheel of "if only," circling round and round in

longing for how things could have been. But once we acknowledge the seam that now separates us, once we acknowledge the veil hanging between the living and the dead, past and present, an opening is granted. As Finch says in her poem, “She leaves this trail through a shudder of the veil, and leaves, like amber where she stays, a gift for her perpetual gaze.”

Autumn, after all, with its pulling back of the veil, is not just about the dying and the losing. It is about the harvest. It is about the abundance born of our efforts. Yesterday, in fact, shortly after I got home from the grief workshop, I was standing outside in my front yard when a neighbor appeared with a basket full of incredibly beautiful foods from a farm where she works once a week. Laid out like a beautiful bouquet were peppers, onions, string beans, chard, bok choy. “I would love for you to have these,” she said. “If anything,” she joked, you’ll help me empty out my fridge.”

Here, in the aftermath of so much sharing about loss, came this bounty. Here, pulled from the earth itself, was sustenance, nourishment, health. An offering. A gift. I received the basket gratefully, and now all that good food waits in my fridge to be enjoyed. Taking in such food, my body, my very soul will carry the beauty, the gifts of the earth, and the efforts of those who have tilled it and sowed it and shared their harvest.

What an invitation for all of us in our experiences of loss. What an opportunity to lift the veil and see the bounty we have been offered even when it feels as if we are completely bereft.

Yesterday, before our workshop ended, we did a quick ritual, writing down significant dates regarding our losses, sharing once more about our losses, singing together, sitting silently in reflection, and finally lighting candles. On the altar where the candles stood was another, larger candle from which we could light ours, and a statue of the Buddha. Also on the altar, on a plate was a rich, red pomegranate cut in half. The pomegranate, I was told, represented the story Persephone. Persephone, as you may know, was kidnapped by Hades, god of the underworld. So devastated by the loss was Persephone's mother, Demeter, who happened to be goddess of the harvest, that all things ceased to grow. Zeus eventually demanded that Hades return Persephone, for fear that the earth itself would die. And Hades did so, but not before tricking Persephone into eating several seeds of a pomegranate, which would force her to return to the underworld for several months of each year. Thus comes the cyclical nature of the seasons, according to this story.

And thus comes the cyclical nature of our lives, as we light candles for our losses, and remember in the eyes of the Buddha, acceptance of the impermanent nature of life. We let go, we take in. We grieve, we receive. Can we see these experiences not as separate from each other, but as intricately, intimately woven together? Might we, in our bereavement of our losses, lift the veil to acknowledge all who have passed from our lives and then discover that we are our ancestors? We carry their answers. We carry not only our love for them, but their love for us, and for the world. We are

the bounty they leave behind. Our sorrows, our losses, shape us, just as much as do our loves, and it is up to us how we will carry *our* wisdom, our *love* until it is time for us, too, to go. Let us do so in the spirit of gratitude, let us do so, so that this too can be a beautiful day. A day to talk about grief, a day to talk about love, a day to give thanks for and to harvest all that is our lives.

Amen.

#128 For All that Is Our Life