

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, 405 Washington Ave. Albany, NY 12206

12.7.14 Sermon: "Missing You"

Presenter: Rev. Sam Trumbore

Sermon

I begin with one more reflection from Ashleigh: This was my first Christmas without mom, she passed in October. I still haven't taken down decorations, after it had been so hard to put them up. I'm living with dad and I tried to make it feel the same. But nothing will ever be the same. It's weird how life goes on. It's weird how it also is put to a dead stop at the same time in so many ways. I also have a baby on the way and a 2 year old that just doesn't understand where Tweety went -his only and the best grandmother I could have asked for my kids. So hard. Heartbreaking. Mind hurts.

On Thursday night, the Rev. Bobbi Place, who served as a Unitarian Universalist Chaplain at Ellis Hospital, did training for our Pastoral Care Associates on the grieving process. She talked about how unpredictable it can be. How it works like a spiral. Over time, things will get better and the crushing weight on the heart begins to let up. Then something will trigger the grieving person to remember their lost loved one and the pain ramps right up again ... maybe not quite as bad as before ... but enough, and often at the most inconvenient time.

The holidays are one of those inconvenient times. We might be around other family members, especially children, who are full of excitement and enthusiasm. It is just the moment the grieving person would rather not have a cloud of misery over their heads as children and grandchildren eagerly anticipate holiday celebrations.

It may not be the death of a close relative that creates that looming cloud. It could be the loss of a job or a failure to gain a promotion. A divorce or separation can cast a shadow over our holiday spirit. The death of a beloved pet can be close, in intensity, to the grief one might experience losing a human friend. A health crisis or becoming disabled can be a very significant loss. Financial problems can also weigh us down and dampen our holiday spirit.

As I get older, I notice another layer of grief. The Pastoral Care Associates talked about how each new loss brings up all the old losses again. The booby prize of aging is to outlive all of those you loved. The aged ache for each one of them again as another friend or family member dies.

And I ache for past events that are gone forever. I remember a lovely (warm) Christmas in Florida in the 1990's. My extended family flew down to join us and rented a house by the beach. I remember walking on Manasota Key with our little son Andy looking for shark's teeth at sunset. I remember helping him build a complex Lego train set with over 800 pieces. That adorable little child is now long gone. Now he is a grown-up adult attending his senior year of college at Potsdam.

Whether, this kind of sweet sorrow remembering past holidays or the tearful agony those daughters I described losing their mothers, they are all points along the continuum of the experience of grief. The range of physical, emotional, relational and even spiritual disruptions that go along with the grief and loss process are enormous.

Physical disruptions can include:

- Both fidgety restlessness and lethargic fatigue, exhaustion and lack of energy; (Grieving takes a lot of energy)
- Unusual body pains that appear and disappear along with muscle tightness or weakness;
- Sleep disruption including insomnia, sleeping too much and disturbing dreams.
- Digestive system disturbance including indigestion, loss of appetite, overeating, nausea, "hollow stomach," constipation and diarrhea;
- And symptoms of anxiety including headaches, shortness of breath, chest tightness and pressure and throat constriction.

Many of these ease over time, but can come back with a vengeance around the holidays as seasonal memories trigger renewed grieving.

Beyond the physical, the emotional disruptions can be very disturbing too. Numbness, denial and disbelief are very common initially, especially when the loss is unexpected. This is a normal defense mechanism we've evolved to help us cope with an overwhelming shock to our system. Numbness might be followed, not in any special order, by feelings of intense anger, sadness and yearning, anxiety, worry and fear, even relief and guilt. Relief and guilt may be some of the harder emotions to handle because they may feel socially inappropriate. After a long illness and a gradual decline of health, there may be a great deal of relief as the burden of care ends. Guilt can be even harder, if we imagine ourselves (accurately or more often inaccurately) in some way complicit with the loss. The torture of going over internal "if only" messages again and again can be a heavy burden.

Anger can be a challenging emotion too as it can polarize us with friends and family members. The urge to unconsciously externalize our feelings and project them on others can do a lot of damage if others don't recognize this as part of the grieving process

Which leads to talking about the damaging effects grieving can have on our relationships. Certainly inappropriately directed anger can take its toll. But there is a larger struggle. With the grieving person being less available and predictable, some friends may retreat and call less often. Those unfamiliar or fearful of the grieving process may not want to be around people who are grieving. This kind of discomfort is more common for younger people who don't know how to behave or how to be helpful to a person that they just can't fix. Just being there and listening may not seem like enough. Yet just showing up, all by itself, again and again, maybe the most important thing any friend can do.

Critical to the grieving process is moving through all these feelings. Resisting and preventing them from coming up through self-medication with drugs and/or alcohol just lengthens the bereavement period. The grief experts say that, even though it is very unpleasant, just riding the grief waves up and down will allow us to find a new normal. The old normal is gone ... but there can be a new one that will allow the grieving person to have a full and meaningful life.

One of the most helpful monitoring functions a friend can do is watch for grief to tip into depression. Listen to Vicki:

I am not the same person as I was prior to losing mum in Sept 2012. I don't know who I am now. I am so bitter and angry and I don't care about anything or anyone really. I just feel as though I have lost everything and no one else matters in the family. I have shut down and I hate who I am now.

Freud put the distinction between the two well: "In grief, the world looks poor and empty. In depression, the person feels poor and empty"

Prolonged feelings of hopelessness and worthlessness, lack of interest in food or in one's normal routine, chronic sleep disruption, inability to concentrate and make decisions, and withdrawing from life, are all strong indicators that depression has taken hold and shut the grieving process down. This is when a professional may be needed to help the grieving person get back on track.

But that is the extreme case. There is a great deal we can do to support people who are grieving at every stage of the journey. The most important thing we can do is just to show up, accept the reality of what the grieving person is experiencing and feeling, and listen without trying to fix it. Grief is like a physical wound that will heal gradually. Grief has a time line

none of us can control. Love can't fix it or even speed it up ... but it does make a big difference to not face the pain of loss alone.

The hardest part of the roller coaster of grief is keeping a larger perspective. Each physical and emotional disturbance is usually temporary -though it can feel eternal while it is active. Regrets need to be evaluated rationally for their reality, then released. We have to make peace with the past, move on and let it go. Usually, we've done the best we could have done under the circumstances. Keeping an inventory of what you did do to help out and the generous acts you did do can help balance the ledger.

One fear that can be addressed is forgetting that person. Precious memories can be maintained in a scrap book, albums of pictures can be collected, videos and audio recordings of the person's image and voice can be archived on DVDs. A cabinet with the person's favorite objects can be a way to keep their memory alive and honor them.

Another way to honor their memory is through putting energy into a project or cause that the person was committed to. Scholarships or memorial contributions for such things as flowers here on Sunday morning are a way to honor that person's memory.

Actually this congregation can be a very helpful source of support during the holidays. Being able to blend into a community setting to participate in seasonal activities can be very comforting. We do community activities each year such as the holiday craft fair and tree decorating as we did yesterday, caroling as we'll do this coming Sunday, our solstice service and of course our Christmas Eve service.

I've been participating in these events in Unitarian Universalist congregations around the country for over 50 years. I haven't done them with exactly the same people in any of these settings ... but there is a continuity of spirit. In the years I have served here, I've seen children busy making graham cracker, gingerbread houses in the holiday crafts fair grow up and return from college on Christmas Eve. I've lit candles on Christmas Eve and sung Silent Night in Delaware, California, Florida and New York. Somehow, when we celebrate holidays as a community, that continuity of the human family is affirmed -even when loved ones are no longer here to share them with us.

And remember, grieving does not last forever. What does mature grief sound like? Listen to Barbara and Debbie:

Barbara writes:

This is the second Christmas without my mom. It does get easier, but I still miss her. I don't think we ever "get over" losing someone we love. The tears are fewer, the

memories become sweet instead of painful, but you never stop missing that person or wishing they were with you for the holidays

Debbie writes: This was the third Christmas without my mom. It's still really tough but it was better than the first one without her. I had a dream about her early Christmas morning and I never dream about her. I felt that was her way of showing she's here in spirit and I was sad when I woke up and reality set back in ... but then ... was happy I got to see my mom and saw her warm smile. To those of you who lost your mom recently, it's hard, I'm not going to lie. I still miss my mom like crazy! But you will slowly find that you'll have more good days. Take it one day at a time.

Yes, taking one day at a time is a pragmatic way to deal with the grieving process. Eventually there will be a light at the end of the tunnel. But that new world beyond the tunnel will be new and different from the time and place the grief tunnel began. We can't go back to the way things were, but we can find new life, new light, new love and new hope.

May those of us who are going through a rough patch this holiday season find solace here and in the days ahead.