

Halleluia, Anyway

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When I was a student in seminary, back in 1971, my advisor shared with me an evaluation he wrote on me for a class. He wrote some good things, but then he said something like: "I don't believe she really knows, really understands, death and loss." Death and loss are of course crucial areas of human endeavor for a minister to know about. But I was young. I had had at that point in my life only limited experience of personal loss, and no one very close to me had died. My experience in the life of congregations was likewise limited at that early point. In the intervening years, however, the darker side of life has certainly caught up with me, as it does sooner or later with all of us. I have had my share of personal loss, down times, illness, the death of people close to me, the pain and regrets and feeling of emptiness and sometimes anger that goes with losses and difficulties. I have also, in these decades of ministry, heard many stories of suffering from people in the churches I've served--losses and tragedies sometimes so profound as to shake and shatter one's life to its very foundations.

As the wise one, Gautama Siddhartha, known as the Buddha, said, life is *dukka, dukka* being impermanence and the suffering that goes with it. In short, the Buddha acknowledged that life is a very bumpy road. You may remember the story of the Buddha's awakening, a story that is an allegory of the growth of our awareness of misfortune and suffering as we age. The Buddha when young was a prince, protected by his father the king from the ills of the world behind the palace walls, in a kind of Eden before the fall. The king had been given a prophecy about his son. He would either turn out to be a great king or a great religious leader. To insure that it would be the former, the king kept his naive son locked inside the comfortable palace environment. But one day without his father's knowledge Gautama left the palace, and he saw a beggar on the road. He asked his charioteer. "Who is that? Why is he so thin? What is that bowl for?" The charioteer answered that the man is a beggar who doesn't have enough to eat. On succeeding days Gautama snuck beyond the palace gates and saw, in succession, a very ill person, an old man, bent over, and then someone who was being carried in a processional—a dead person. "Will I become ill, will I get old and bent, will I die?" asked Gautama, and of course his honest charioteer had to tell him the truth about life. Before these excursions, Gautama knew nothing of suffering, infirmity, aging or death. His new awareness set him on the path that was to lead to his great spiritual awakening and his religious leadership.

When young, I was like Gautama, the protected prince. Well, not quite. I was a lit major, after all. I had read all of Shakespeare's tragedies, and a good many more literary stories and poetic lamentations about the human condition of suffering. I even wrote about life's suffering myself. But what did I really know? I had been lucky. I had not experienced pain, suffering and loss to any significant degree. Like Gautama, though usually at a slower pace, as we move from innocence through experience, it dawns on us that life is indeed a bumpy road. My understanding of this has grown and deepened over the years, and it is growing still. I know that there are yet more bumps and potholes ahead. Sometimes, I just want to sigh with the ache of it all.

And yet, and yet...I am also continually learning as I age that life gives us much, when we are open to receiving it, that there is much to rejoice in. As time goes on, most of us come to realize that life itself, which we may have taken for granted when younger, is an incredible miraculous gift, and that it is studded with diamonds—little moments of joy: the experience of love, the consolation of community, the inspiration of art and music and poetry, the awesome beauty of nature, the joy of spiritual growth, the satisfaction of learning new things, feelings of well-being and peace. These are woven into the complex tapestry as well.

But how can we be sustained through the rough times—the times when we feel like the Biblical Job, hard hit by misfortune and uncomprehending as to how such bad things can happen to us? What can help get us through the times when we are so beset by grief or heartbreak or unhappiness that we lose sight of life's gifts? We know that not everyone does get through the rough patches. What is it that helps one person survive and even thrive, while another is knocked so far down that he or she gives up?

There are a few things I've gleaned from my own and others' experiences with pain, loss and misfortune that I believe can be helpful, which I'd like to share:

1. Look your despair square in the eye. Meet the darkness head-on and even dwell with it for a time. "In a dark time," says the poet Theodore Roethke, "the eye begins to see." If you've ever taken a night nature walk on a moonless night (as we do during the UU family camp in Mendocino), you know that it is very disorienting and even frightening at first, not to be able to see at all, not even your hand in front of your face. But after a while, your eyes adjust, and you can begin to make out shapes, and recognize things, and you are actually seeing in a new way. Likewise, in the midst of an emotional dark time, if we stay with it long enough, we may begin to recognize and understand our lives, and life in general, in a new and different way. There is a natural tendency to avoid or squelch emotional pain by going back to business-as-usual too soon after a loss, or by dousing the problem with alcohol or escapist drugs or other diversionary behaviors. But pain, though it's unwanted, can be a teacher. Untended wounds have a way of opening up at unexpected times, and bleeding again, hurting us time and time again, keeping us stuck in cycles and waves of despair.

This little poem by Peshia Gertler speaks of the need to dwell in the darkness for a while, and pay attention to what the pain may have to teach:

The Healing Time

*Finally on my way to yes
I bump into
all the places
where I said no
to my life
all the untended wounds
the red and purple scars
those hieroglyphs of pain
carved into my skin, my bones,
those coded messages
that send me down*

*the wrong street
again and again
where I find them
the old wounds
the old misdirections
and I lift them
one by one
close to my heart
and I say holy
holy.*

2. Try to keep a realistic perspective. It is all too easy for many optimists to forget when times are good that hardship will befall us, that some pain, loss and misfortune are bound to catch up with us if we live long enough. Folks who deny the dark side of life are apt to be rudely stunned and especially hard hit with depression and despair when difficulty does come. Likewise, more pessimistically-inclined folks, and nearly all of us when times are rough, have trouble remembering those little diamonds of joy, satisfaction and wellbeing that are also part of the intricate fabric of life. When hardship, loss and pain make a visit, remember that this is a real part of life, but don't mistake it for all of reality. (By this realism I don't mean that we should apply the common salve we sometimes try to smear over a tragedy, when we say: "Look on the bright side." Of course, there may be a bright side even to a tragedy, if, for instance a death comes mercifully to one who has been suffering. But sometimes, there just is no bright side. Not every cloud has a silver lining, but it is helpful to know that somewhere else the sun is shining, and that it can shine again on us as well.

3. Try to remember, in both bad times and good, to praise and bless those things in life that are true blessings. A scholar of Judaism, Jo Milgrom, from whom I took a class during a brief sabbatical leave, speaks of *baruchas*, blessings, which in Judaism are "thank you" prayers or blessings for the many little gifts of life. And no matter what your circumstances, there are bound to be blessings embedded in your life. Jo Milgrom often assigns students to spend one day being aware of these *baruchas* in life, and recording at least 100 thank-yous in a day to share with the rest of the class. It is amazing how many usually unacknowledged *baruchas* we have, even when we are in the midst of difficulty. The great tennis player Arthur Ashe, once said: "I am a fortunate, blessed man. Aside from AIDS and heart disease, I have no problems." Cultivating an affirming outlook may sustain us, even save us.

4. Stay connected to others. This may seem like a "no-brainer." Of course it helps to have supportive people around in a crisis or during periods of hardship. But we need to acknowledge the tendency, sometimes the need, for alone time during the healing process. When an animal is wounded, it slinks off by itself to nurse its wounds. So too, we may need to be by ourselves at times, or for a time. But we humans, most of us, also need community to help heal, and to thrive. Sometimes it's a matter of letting people in who are already there to help, and who want to be useful. We may not even know how much support and friendship there is for us until we are hit by misfortune. Sometimes, we need to create community for ourselves—seeking out support groups of people who are or have been in similar circumstances, or joining intentional communities of people, like joining or becoming more active in a religious group, or finding a social or special interest group to belong to.

5. Nurture and cultivate, when possible, a sense of humor. Humor can be healing, because it requires us to at least partly transcend ourselves and the pathos of our situation for a brief time. Garrison Keillor has said: "Humor is not a trick, not jokes. Humor is a presence in the world—like grace—and shines on everyone." The gracious presence of humor can and does lead to healing, not just of the mind and spirit, but, as research shows, of the body as well. You might think that when people are grieving the loss of a loved one who has died, humor seems out of place. But I have seen it work wonders, for instance, when meeting with family members and hearing them reminisce about the humorous outlook or antics of the deceased, or at memorial services, when some humorous stories and reminiscences are told, and everyone chuckles for a moment, cherishing a delightful memory. Humor has helped me through hard times, when like Norman Cousins I have deliberately sought out humorous books and films to lift my spirits. Cousins did it with the Marx Brothers; I do it with Monty Python and Zippy comics. It works, even if only briefly.

Some years ago, I was in a tight-knit little group of colleagues, members of the UU Ministers' Association Executive Committee. There were seven of us. We met four times a year for two years in semi-exotic places like Catalina Island, Las Vegas, and the Green Gulch Zen Center in Marin. At each meeting, when the day's work was done, we would go snorkeling, or take in a show, or play poker into the wee hours. I have heard that other UUMA "Execs" were more practical and serious than we were, but we also got the job done. At the time I was on that Board, there was a popular ironic phrase circulating: "Life is hard, and then...you die!" Another version I heard at the time was: "Life's a bitch, and then you die." Some more fun-loving souls turned this latter dryly humorous phrase into "Life's a beach," and left off the "then you die" part. Well, we in our little minister's group liked it straight, and in our casual conversations, we'd sometimes shake our heads and say, semi-humorously: "Life is hard.... and then you die." But our little group made an important editorial addition: "Life is hard, and then you die. Halleluia, anyway." It became our motto. We never needed to explain to each other what it meant. We all understood that what we were expressing was the need to celebrate, praise, bless life, in spite of its challenges and mishaps. In the years since I was part of that fun-loving group, one member died, in her mid-fifties, one had a serious heart attack, one suffered a hard blow to his ministerial career, and two of us got divorced. The road has been as bumpy as the Buddha said it was so many centuries ago. But we still need to praise life, enjoy it, celebrate it, bless it. So, HALLELUIA, HALLELUIA, HALLELUIA, Anyway!