

## “Singing a Mother’s Song”

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What do you do when you want something with all your heart,  
something you know is right for you,  
something you know would be good for this world,  
as much as we can ever know anything,  
and it doesn’t happen?

What do you do when wanting so much turns into waiting,  
and waiting, and hoping,  
and waiting,  
and perhaps *losing* hope?  
What does it mean, how are we to bear it,  
when our most cherished dream never becomes real?

We’ve all been there in one way or other, some time or another.  
Maybe you’ve stood in this place when a job you wanted very badly  
went to someone else,  
or when someone you loved very much just didn’t love you back.  
We have all been there.  
Children know the sorrow of wanting just as much as adults,  
though we who are grown-ups sometimes make the mistake  
of downplaying the intensity of their feelings.  
I think of Peter from our story,<sup>1</sup>  
who wanted so badly to stay little and be the baby of the family,  
trying to hold on to something that could no longer be.  
We’ve all been there. It’s hard. It hurts.  
Peter found his way to being OK with reality, but it wasn’t so easy.  
It’s hard for all of us to accept  
when things don’t go the way we wanted,

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<sup>1</sup> Ezra Jack Keats, *Peter’s Chair* (New York: Viking, 1998 [1967]).

the way we thought they were going to go.

On this Mother's Day,  
I want to invite us into mindfulness and compassion  
around a particularly painful kind of wanting and hoping  
that we rarely talk about, and that is infertility.  
Drawing on our strength and our compassion,  
let us open our hearts to the reality that in every community  
there is secret sorrow, pain, and grief, maybe just below the surface,  
borne by those among us who have longed to be parents  
and found that it just hasn't happened.

On this day, it is so right for us to celebrate  
the many good mothers and fathers in our midst,  
to lift up the love and commitment and hard work  
of our own parents, wherever it was present,  
and of all the parents who do their best  
to raise good and decent and joyful kids.  
This work is worthy of our highest praise and honor.

It is also right to celebrate the invisible parents in our midst—  
all those would-be mothers and fathers  
who are parents in their heart.  
In any community, they are present among us.  
In this country, one out of every eight couples  
has struggled with infertility.  
It is so very common.  
So many women and couples try and try to become pregnant,  
and it just doesn't happen.  
So many have gone through the anguish of miscarriage.  
Even people who have been able to become parents  
may be carrying secret sorrow  
for a pregnancy that didn't make it.  
And so many of them suffer in virtual silence.  
It's just not something we talk about,

except with maybe a very few trusted friends.

But these silent sorrows are no less real for being unspoken.  
Men and women struggling with infertility  
have to wrestle with some very deep challenges.  
They may feel sadness and depression, anger,  
a near-constant anxiety and worry.  
The roller-coaster of wondering and hoping each month,  
only to be disappointed, can be so hard to take.  
For some people,  
infertility is the biggest spiritual crisis they will ever face.  
Psychologist Silvia Schneider Fox puts it this way:

Infertility rattles the deepest parts of our being.  
It makes us question the fairness of life,  
the predictability of the future and our control over it.  
It unravels...our whole view of the world.  
When this view has been guided by...faith...  
the result is a [spiritual] crisis of vast proportions.<sup>2</sup>

For Unitarian Universalists,  
I think there is one special danger  
that we really have to watch out for especially.  
You may have heard of the idea of “Salvation by Character.”  
This is the classic Unitarian idea  
that human beings have so much potential—  
that people are basically good—  
and the job of every human being is to develop our character  
so that, when we come to die, we will be good people, deeply good.  
The Unitarian Christians of the 19<sup>th</sup> century  
believed this was how people could earn their way into Heaven.  
Today we are much less certain of what comes after death,  
but we still lift up this ideal of working on ourselves,

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<sup>2</sup> Silvia Schneider Fox, “The Spiritual Crisis of Infertility,” online at  
<http://www.drssfox.com/uploads/The%20spiritual%20crisis%20of%20infertility.pdf>.

continually developing our character and everything about us,  
and we feel confident our efforts will not be in vain.

Now, this is not a bad idea,  
but I think it can get us into spiritual trouble  
because it depends on a very deep belief  
that we are in control of what happens to us.  
And the truth is, sometimes we just aren't.  
People struggling with infertility learn this the hard way.  
It's so easy to think,  
*If I just try harder...or learn more...or relax more... or whatever...*  
it'll finally happen—but sometimes it just doesn't.  
And this is a very hard thing to make peace with.

It's true, there can be learning here.  
Pema Chödrön is so right when she reminds us that  
“sadness can teach us great compassion.”<sup>3</sup>  
A crisis like infertility is an opportunity for spiritual growth,  
it is a chance to deepen our compassion  
for the suffering of the world—  
but first and foremost, it *hurts*.  
And it dishonors the pain to try to ignore it  
or leap over it too quickly.  
I think of the words of the ancient Greek playwright Aeschylus:

...pain that cannot forget  
Falls drop by drop upon the heart,  
And in our own despite, against our will,  
Comes wisdom to us by the awful grace of God.<sup>4</sup>

Pain that falls drop by drop upon the heart.  
And wisdom through the awful grace of God.  
The wisdom may come, and may it be so.

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<sup>3</sup> Pema Chödrön, *The Places That Scare You* (Boston: Shambhala, 2001), pp. 4.

<sup>4</sup> Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*

But it comes through pain.

So let us open our hearts and minds  
to embrace everyone struggling with infertility,  
this terrible wanting and not having,  
with a spirit of compassion and tenderness.  
It is so needed and so healing.

And let's stretch our hearts even more  
to embrace all those little ones who didn't make it,  
all those little ones whose lives ended in miscarriage  
even before they were born,  
and the wished-for little ones who have lived only in our imagination,  
our hopes and prayers—  
for they are a part of this community too.  
Let us send out our hearts to embrace them too,  
and the parents who love them still.  
It is so needed and so healing.

**Interlude:** *Anthem "Healing Circle"*

The novelist and poet Madeleine L'Engle once asked,

How shall we sing our love's song now  
In this strange land where all are born to die?<sup>5</sup>

We are all fellow travelers in this strange land,  
seeking to live in a spirit of love and hope,  
and how do we find our hope?  
Where are we going to find our healing?  
Community helps, so much.  
Naming our grief helps so much.

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<sup>5</sup> Madeleine L'Engle, *A Ring of Endless Light* (New York: Dell, 1980), p. 172.

And trying to keep an open heart to what is,  
whether or not it is what we are wishing for.

There's a reading in our hymnal by the Indian poet  
Rabindranath Tagore, which reads in part:

Grant me that I may not...[feel] your mercy in my success alone,  
But let me find the grasp of your hand in my failure.<sup>6</sup>

May I not feel mercy in success alone, but also in failure.  
I think what he is asking for is what we all need to ask for at one time  
or another—for the heart and the courage to accept what is,  
to accept disappointment and loss,  
to allow ourselves to be in that place of sadness, to go to the depths,  
trusting that in those depths may be found a shimmer of hope,  
of peace, and joy for us all.

If we just allow ourselves to be sad when we are sad,  
and scared when we are scared,  
if we just let ourselves feel all those things that need to be felt,  
eventually we may find joy and hope welling up within us again.  
Because here is the mystery:  
as long as we live, it is our nature to hope.  
I can't tell you why this is so, but I know it is so.

Just as plants grow toward the sun,  
the life within us grows upward too,  
reaching for warmth and energy and life  
wherever they can be found.  
Imagine a river of flowing water.  
If it's blocked at any time, you know what happens.  
That water will find a new path,  
carving it out of granite if it has to,  
because the nature of water is to flow.

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<sup>6</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, poem 89 in *Fruit Gathering* (1916), quoted in *Singing the Living Tradition*, #519.

So, the love in our hearts,  
when it is blocked by disappointment and sorrow,  
will find a new path, something, someone,  
a million billion someones to love.  
Because the nature of love is to flow.

The psychiatrist Erik Erikson believed every person  
needs to make a commitment to life and love,  
to “establishing and guiding the next generation.”  
We all need to commit to nurturing the next generation  
of life abundant on this earth  
if we are not going to fall into despair.<sup>7</sup>  
For the majority of us, that commitment takes its primary form  
in raising children.  
And if that is the path we want to take, and it is blocked to us,  
the pain is real. The grief is real.  
But that path is not the only path of beauty and joy.  
For all who are walking the path of parenthood,  
may it bring you deep joy.  
For all who hope and pray to walk that path,  
may that wish be fulfilled, and may it bring you joy.  
But for those whose wish will not be granted,  
may your life too be abundantly rich in joy and beauty.

All of us need to find channels for the love within us.  
Even through our sadness, we can trust that it’s OK.  
Because there is so much worthy of our love.  
Everything that lives is worthy of our love.  
Our task is to let our heart be drawn to what it loves naturally—  
“to let the soft animal of your body love what it loves,”  
in the beautiful words of our poet Mary Oliver,  
and just let that love unfold in acts of care and generosity, naturally.<sup>8</sup>  
This will heal our hearts. It really will.

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<sup>7</sup> Erik Erikson, *Childhood and Society* (New York: Norton, 1993), pp. 266–268.

<sup>8</sup> Mary Oliver, “Wild Geese,” quoted in *Singing the Living Tradition* #490.

I want to tell you a story of love in action  
that I was privileged to witness just this week.  
My husband and I live in a townhouse with a little pond out back.  
And we have been loving watching the family of ducks  
that live close by.  
Mom and eight baby ducklings have been showing up every day  
to swim around and eat the birdseed we put out.  
But on Tuesday there were only seven baby ducks.  
And Thursday morning there were only three.  
We felt sad about it, but we knew there was nothing we could do.

Or that's what we thought.  
Thursday around lunchtime, John looks out the window  
and sees four of the lawn guys in our next-door neighbor's yard,  
clustered around the edge of the pond.  
They come every week and Thursday's their day.  
And they're next to this hole in the yard, right by the pond.  
Now, I had heard there was this hole that needed to get fixed—  
some pipe has been leaking and it's been taped off with yellow tape  
for weeks, so people know to watch out.  
But no one had covered it.  
And now the lawn guys are huddled around this hole—  
John and I go out to see what's going on,  
and, oh, my gosh, that hole in the ground is much, much deeper  
than I realized, and there is chirping coming from it,  
and when we look down we see a couple of ducklings trapped inside!

So we all leap into action—I pull out my emergency *español*,  
which is very *mas o menos*, but they speak a little English too,  
and we make a plan.  
First we try to scoop up the little ducks with a pond skimmer,  
but it doesn't work—the angle's all wrong  
and the ducks are way too scared.  
So then the lawn guys start digging to widen the hole a little bit,

we go grab some flashlights,  
John brings out some latex gloves so if we can get to the ducks  
they won't have human-being-smell on them,  
and what happens next is just unbelievable.  
The skinniest guy goes in head-first,  
the other guys are holding on to his ankles,  
and that hole is at least six feet deep,  
and he's stretching his arms to reach the ducklings,  
and then he's yelling to his buddies to bring them up,  
and up he comes with two freaked-out ducklings,  
but healthy-looking, and they splash into the pond,  
and the guy tells us, there's three more down there!

So he goes back down that hole, head-first, two more times,  
and comes back up with three more little ducklings,  
completely freaked out but still healthy-looking,  
and the ducklings all scamper off,  
and he's covered with dirt,  
and it was like a miracle. This guy was a hero.  
We figured out one of those little ducklings  
must have been down there for three days.  
You better believe we covered the hole right then and there,  
covered it with boards and a tarp and staked it down solid.

We didn't see the ducklings all that day.  
We hoped, hoped, hoped they would be OK.  
We hoped they would find their way back to their family.  
We feared they would not.  
But I tell you what, I just about burst into tears the next morning  
when the ducks showed up in the pond  
and I counted 1-2-3-4-5-6-7-8 baby ducklings safe with their mom.  
Those guys saved them all, every single one.  
And for a moment, the universe sang so sweetly.

Words of the Metta Sutta:

Even as a mother watches over her child,  
so with boundless mind should one cherish all living beings.<sup>9</sup>

May we all be blessed with open hearts  
and fellow creatures to love.  
Peace to all, and hope, and joy.

So may it be.  
Amen.

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<sup>9</sup> Metta Sutta, quoted in *Singing the Living Tradition* #596.