

## The Only Way Out is Through

readings: 'Dirge without Music' by Edna St. Vincent Millay  
'Sweetness' by Stephen Dunn  
'Sometimes, I am Startled out of Myself,' by Barbara Crooker

"Grief turns out to be a place none of us know until we reach it," writes Joan Didion. All we can do is pass through the valley of the shadow of death the best we can. Because of the shootings last weekend, some of us are here for the first time. Some of us are long-term residents in the valley of the shadow of death. Some of us have yet to visit.

First, I need to speak to what has happened in our community. As best as I know, no one in our church community was closely linked to any of the victims or the alleged shooter. That doesn't mean we aren't traumatized. Some of us watched the news and listened on police scanners in real time as the shootings unfolded. Others awoke last Sunday to the awful news. Many of us have been in the places where the shootings happened or pass them regularly. Especially with no motive still known, it is easy to think, "that could have happened to me." "I could have been among those killed." We try and fail to make sense of what is senseless.

Our community has been traumatized and terrorized. Any illusions we hold about safety, certainty, control, or our ability to protect those we love have been shattered. Our world might not feel the same as it did 10 days ago. Traumas, even ones that we don't experience directly, impact our bodies, minds, and souls. I have some handouts prepared by the Unitarian Universalist Trauma response ministry that describe typical reactions among adults and children to traumatic events, as well as appropriate responses. I encourage you to pick them up and take them home to read. They are on the cart at the back center of the sanctuary.

In adults, typical reactions include anxiety, guilt, fatigue, lack of concentration, increased conflict in our relationships, and spiritual disconnection – and about two dozen other symptoms. All of this is normal. That doesn't make it any easier to bear, but it is normal. Again, the handouts have ideas for how to cope, if this is your new reality.

In children, a common reaction to trauma is regression. A child that has mastered potty-training might start wetting the bed again. A child might return to behaviors they outgrew several years before. Children and adults dealing with trauma might complain of physical symptoms, like stomach aches or a pounding heart. Teenagers might isolate, express helplessness or get into trouble in ways they haven't before. Again, all of this is normal. Again, the handouts at the back of the sanctuary share ideas for helping children cope with trauma and manage these responses.

After a traumatic event, it is important to talk to children about what happened in age appropriate ways, to reassure them that you do everything you can to keep them safe. School-age children are surely already talking about the shooting with their classmates. They need to hear from the adults who love them. Even toddlers might sense that the adults closest to them are especially sad or worried right now. Name that you are sad right now. Otherwise they might think they are the cause of your emotions. If you need help figuring out how to best talk with the children in your life about this, please speak to Diane, our director of religious education, or me.

If these reactions do not run their course over the next few weeks or months, if symptoms increase in intensity rather than lessen, if your mind or body or soul's reaction to this trauma interferes with your ability to live your life, it might be time to seek out a professional to help you blaze a trail out of the valley of shadows. If you need help finding someone, please talk to me.

The grief that comes after trauma—the loss of safety and security—is not the same as the grief that comes from more personal losses, the deaths and disappointments that mark our days. I am fully aware that words are of limited usefulness when it comes to grief. Talking won't fix it. There are no magic, healing words that make everything ok. The only way out of the valley of the shadow of death is through. There aren't shortcuts. It is a lonesome journey that, if we love, we all must take.

That said, there are things we should know about grief. I usually say some version of the following words when I lead memorial services, to help us remember what it means to grieve.

There is no one way to grieve. It can be challenging to remember this when people react to a shared loss in different ways. Normal reactions include anger, sadness, withdrawal, stopping everything to mourn, or not feeling much at all at first and continuing on with one's life. It is important to let yourself grieve the way your emotions and body tells you you need to. In the midst of grief, there are days of pure sadness that give way to confusion or disorientation. Grief ebbs and flows. It ignores our busy lives. It interferes with what we think are our needs. We set aside time to grieve only to find numbness. Then we find ourselves driving or listening to music or grocery shopping and feel the tears of sadness, regret, rage and despair rise unbidden.

The task of grief is paradoxical: it is to hold onto the parts of the person who has died that will be ours forever—the stories, the memories, and the love. At the same time, we honor what we have lost – and let go.

There are ways to make grieving more bearable, to make our heavy load of grief easier to carry. We need to take care of our bodies –get enough sleep, eat well, exercise. It is important to have people to listen to us talk about our losses when we want to talk. It is also important—and this might be the most important—to be patient with the grieving process. Grief is hard work. Grief is slow work. Grieving a significant loss takes months.

Loss often sets us on a new trajectory. We slowly find our way to a new normal. Our loss and grief will always be part of who we are. We learn how to carry a new burden and are not the same as we were before. This is all normal. Not easy, but normal.

Though each of us needs time to grieve alone, we also need to return to our communities. We need to seek out one another and our sources of nourishment and strength. Today, we gather to hold one another in our grief. We gather to remember that life is a fragile and precious gift.

Some say that grief is the price we pay for loving. We live and love knowing we will lose everyone and everything. Often, we can push that truth out of mind, and get on with our days, but the truth is that grief comes for us all if we love.

The wise ones tell us that grief can also be a gift – we usually don't realize this until the valley of shadows is no longer our permanent address, when we've healed enough that our grief is no longer our primary

reality, but the low-grade perpetually broken heart that is our constant companion if we live and love in this world. Khalil Gibran, in our words for reflection, writes that 'the selfsame well from which your laughter rises was oftentimes filled with your tears.'

Francis Weller, a psychotherapist specializing grief and sorrow says that, "this life we have is incredibly short, but we've been blessed with it. When we shut off our grief, we forget that. To let grief work its alchemy on you yields gravitas, by which I mean the ability to be present with the bittersweet reality of life, which always includes loss. There's no way to be spared sorrow. I wouldn't even wish that upon someone. But we shouldn't get stuck in our grief; it's not a permanent address but a companion that walks beside us. Everything I love, I will lose. That's the harsh truth. You either have to shut down your heart — and miss the love that is around you — or wrestle with that truth and come out the other end. There is indeed such a thing as joyful sorrow."

Weller continues, "The work of the mature person is to carry grief in one hand and gratitude in the other and to be stretched large by them. How much sorrow can I hold? That's how much gratitude I can give. If I carry only grief, I'll bend toward cynicism and despair. If I have only gratitude, I'll become saccharine and won't develop much compassion for other people's suffering. Grief keeps the heart fluid and soft, which helps make compassion possible."<sup>1</sup>

We need to walk with grief in one hand and gratitude in the other and be stretched large by them. That is our only option if we live lives of love, lives that are destined for seasons of grief.

I close my reflection today with a poem from Gregory Orr. He writes in a poem without a title:

Grief will come to you.  
Grip and cling all you want,  
It makes no difference.

Catastrophe? It's just waiting to happen.  
Loss? You can be certain of it.

Flow and swirl of the world.  
Carried along as if by a dark current.

All you can do is keep swimming;  
All you can do is keep singing.

---

<sup>1</sup> McKee, Tim. "The Geography of Sorrow: Francis Weller on Navigating Our Losses." The Sun. October 2015. Issue 478. Retrieved from [http://thesunmagazine.org/issues/478/the\\_geography\\_of\\_sorrow](http://thesunmagazine.org/issues/478/the_geography_of_sorrow)