

MAKING OUR LOSSES MATTER

The Jewish New Year, while formally over, still resonates in our soul, especially when addressing today's topic of making our losses matter, of new beginnings.

As if you didn't already know, life's marked by three recurring themes: anticipated loss, loss itself, and grieving over loss. Our very existence begins with loss. We're profoundly separated from the protective womb, disconnected from the heartbeat of the cosmos, thrust into an uncertain and often harsh world. This birth trauma marks the beginning of a journey that ends with the loss of life itself.

And now we're stuck, without any clear resolution, in the "worst financial catastrophe since the Great Depression." All San Dieguitans, in one way or another, are trapped in this crisis together. Now, we can raise our prophetic voices to rail against the values and policies that brought us here, raise awareness and advocate for change, and promote generosity to alleviate present suffering. And we should do all of that, but as your pastor, while I don't have answers to our shared confusion and anxiety, I do want you to know that I'm always available for counsel, if you're especially troubled and need personal support.

Furthermore, I want you to know that the UUA has created a special webpage called "Worship Resources for Tough Economic Times" at <http://www.uua.org/spirituallife/120486.shtml>. I hope you will find some solace there, as I have.

But today I want us to look at the larger picture of human reality, so that we might make our losses matter. Our losses are legion and daily. Lost time. Lost limbs. Lost

momentum. Lost memory. Lost faith. Lost friends. Lost jobs. Lost loves. Lost hair. Lost innocence. Lost children. Lost money. Lost energy. Lost dreams (what I call “the nevers”: I guess I’m never going to be head of the firm, never going to have children of my own, never going to be a great writer, never going to be much of an activist, etc.) On and on runs the lousy litany of losses—some necessary but others infuriatingly ill-timed.

You name it, we humans have lost it during our lifetimes! Many pray for a way to make sure that we’ll not lose again. But God gives that privilege to no one.

Remember Buddha’s classic answer to a mother who had lost her child. According to legend, he said that to be healed, she needed only a mustard-seed from a household that had never known sorrow. The woman journeyed from home to home, all over the world, but never found a family ignorant of grief. Instead, in the paradoxical manner of myths and oracles, she hopefully found truth, compassion, kinship, and rebirth.

And so it goes. Unexpected deaths strike, job situations fall flat, unsettling partnership breaks occur, untimely moves are called for, long-held beliefs fail us. That losses will assault our cozy comfortable lives is inevitable; but what we do with those losses is up to us. And that choice is sometimes a matter of hope or despair. You see, pain is unavoidable, but misery is optional. Hence, the key question in the religious journey is simply this: can we build an altar from the broken fragments of our hearts? Are we brave enough to do so?

There are three things we can do with pain, and two of them are bad. We can pass the pain along, we can stuff it, or we can transform it. The purpose of life is to transform pain, and we can do just that, if we don’t fall prey to three other pitfalls: denial, comparison-making, and self-pity or whining.

First, denial. There are crises which we'd really rather ignore and suppress, so we do just that. Our partnership isn't really crumbling, it's just coasting. Our family doesn't need outside help; we just need to care more about one another. But friends, sometimes love isn't enough. Or we tell our children that grandma has gone to sleep, mainly to protect our own unwillingness to accept the death of loved ones, let alone our own death.

And yet, where can we turn during a loss if we don't even admit that there is a loss? If we turn the anger, hurt, or guilt in against ourselves, we compound the suffering. If we repress, we invariably depress. And the converse is also true: "Blessed are they who mourn, for they shall be comforted!" Comfort, my friends, deep comfort comes from full mourning. Yes, it surely does!

Now, it's natural to sugar-coat anguish, but we must keep in mind that most people who suffer severe losses retain permanent scars, no matter how much theology or therapy we imbibe. Some people who have experienced grievous losses say they never again feel quite up to par. They experience a sense of chronic sorrow, bone-deep sadness. That's just the way life works.

We moderns are told to follow our bliss; we would do well so also follow our pain—stay close to it, sit and soak in it as a prelude to growing through it. With Shantideva, the Buddhist saint, we can say "let all sorrows ripen in me." And we help sorrows ripen by passing them directly through our bodies and hearts, making good compost of all that fierce grief. None of us can truly afford to waste our pain.

In addition to denial, a second futile strategy is comparing our loss with those of others, usually comparing ours with the 10 worst tragedies of all time. Of course, there are always people who have ostensibly suffered more and less than we have. There's

always someone in seemingly worse shape than we are, but such comparisons bring but temporary or pseudo-relief.

And remember there's a clear distinction between simply being uncomfortable and having a broken heart. The difference was brought home poignantly in Alice Hoffman's novel *At Risk*, a dialogue between Polly, the mother of a child dying of AIDS, and Betty, the mother who refuses to let her son have contact with the dying child's brother. "This breaks my heart," Betty whispers. "No, no!" Polly tells her. "It makes you uncomfortable. My son's dying breaks my heart!" Polly feels a sharpness and size of anguish not possibly felt by Betty in this novel.

We can't get inside other people's hearts. We have no idea how devastating or perhaps relieving the loss of a certain pet or relative might in fact be. We have no business then, evaluating the seriousness of another's hurt—our job is to be present, listen, care. Because down-deep, we don't want other people rating our losses or making judgments. We need from others what they need from us: ears and arms! That's right: ears and arms.

"How do you feel about it?" be it retirement or divorce, is a safer and more respectful reaction than, "Oh, I'm so sorry" or "I know exactly how you feel (which, of course, you don't) or "Gee, you must be relieved," which they may not be.

My friends, the best response is open-ended: "How do you feel about it?" or "How are you doing?" simply hear the hurting person's own assessment of the loss which, by the way, is always more important than the actual loss. And follow it, if appropriate, with a caring question like: "Is there something I can be or do for you?"

So, first off, denial is unhelpful, so are comparisons, and finally, self-pity, is fruitless in coping with loss. It's clearly more comforting to feel "put upon" or unfairly treated, than it is to deal directly with the disappointments we all face. Yet no matter how the fates may seem to conspire, we still make or forsake our own singular destinies.

Jesus didn't stand for self-pitying sorts as evidenced when he said to more than one person: "Come on, rise, take up your pallet and walk." Now, sometimes that's a cruel command, if we can't possibly make it out of the pool of sadness by ourselves. At other times, it's precisely the kick in the rear that self-pitying folks might need.

You know, at some point in our journeys, we have to recognize that we live in an imperfect world. So many tragedies result from an unfinished, evolving world rather than from the will or action of God. God doesn't start earthquakes or administer blindness. I believe that any infinite, loving Spirit worth its salt weeps along with us in the throes of such natural or inexplicable disasters. My notion of an Eternal Source is all-loving but not all-powerful

As humans we will never make total sense out of the mystery of suffering. But we cope with it most sensibly by participating as actively as we can in the healing process and by teaming up through song or prayer with the infinite source of love and wisdom.

In addition to calling upon Divine Love to companion us in moving through our losses, we need clearly to call upon one another. We can never fully bear loss alone. Sadly, often when we lose something or someone, we hide out too long, we narrow our souls and draw ourselves tighter and tighter, trying to feel safe but actually cutting off from the source of our strength and support, other sufferers. Never forget that we all belong to the fellowship of pain, Schweitzer's phrase for the largest unofficial

organization in the universe, and as we are bound together in sorrow, *so* can we be bound together in healing.

Did you know that the word *care* finds its roots in the Gothic “kara” which means lament? The basic role of a friend or companion or caregiver, then, is one with whom you can grieve, experience sorrow, and share support, especially those who have felt sorrow themselves, not in general but yours in particular. That’s why AA works. That’s why parents of murdered children works for that grieving group. That’s why a group of single mothers isn’t served well by having a partnered father in the room or vice versa.

But alas, God and groups, while absolutely essential, don’t fully cure us of our ills. We are cared about and comforted but not cured. Some pain invariably remains. Yet outside support, be it in the form of humans or a higher power or a beautiful blend of both, gives us the energy and skill, forgiveness and hope to grow on...not beyond our pain but *through* it. We seldom get over pain; we simply get used to it, or get through it. And we can regain our equilibrium despite an oft-constant, deep heartache.

I frequently ask myself, as do you I’m sure, whether or not I would choose a life void of suffering. And I realize that even if I was given the opportunity for unadulterated bliss I’d turn it down. I guess that’s why the conventional notion of “heaven” has never really thrilled me.

My conviction is that if we cut off despair, we cut off hope. Joy loses its edge without the presence of its partner sorrow. As Unitarian forebear Theodore Parker sagely put it: “As I look over my life, I find no disappointment and no sorrow I could afford to lose...”

The wise ones among us understand life truly to be a struggle, not an unbearable one, but a tough, persistent struggle nonetheless, from start to finish. And so with Beowulf, we can say: “Let us lie down and bleed awhile, then get up and struggle again.”

It’s clear to me that the purpose of mature existence is to manage comebacks, to be born again and again and again, or as the Zen poet phrase it: “Such is life: seven times down and eight times up!” You see, our human dignity lies neither in innocence nor in despondency but in new beginnings, in being scarred and healed a thousand times, becoming seasoned, gnarled persons.

The story is told of a monk who lived in a monastery high on a mountain. One day he descended to the village below and a peasant ran up to him and said, “Oh, father, surely yours must be the best of all lives, living so close to God. Tell me, what do you do up there?” After a thoughtful pause, the monk replied, “What do we do? Well, I’ll tell you. We fall down and get up. Then we fall down and get up. Then we fall down and get up. That’s pretty much what our lives look like—how about yours?”

A few years ago, I got a call about 10:30 at night, just about the hour when we ministers get anxious with the home phone ringing. On the other end of the line was a male voice who said: “Remember me...?” I replied: “Give me a few moments, and I’ll present you with your name.” I knew all along who it was, because he sported an unmistakable voice, but I needed time to collect myself. “You’re Jack Brandon.” He then launched into his inimitable laugh, recalled from some 40 years ago, when we were students in seminary together.

Jack had come from a severely repressed, fundamentalist upbringing. He was intellectually brilliant, yet personally tormented. One night, in the dorm, we were sharing

some emotionally heavy stuff, and he literally regressed to being a baby, and I was thrown precipitously into the role of being his mother. Not father but mother.

I can't nor do I wish to replay the entire scary and exhausting episode, but suffice it to say, we both went through enough of an emotional wringer to deem it necessary to see the campus counselor the very next day. Jack was beginning to open up an avalanche of profound hurts and hungers, which needed sustained professional guidance. Although in ministerial training, I was in far over my head, being essentially a caring friend with helpaholic tendencies at the time.

Dr. Schmidt was tremendously moved by our powerful, primal raw exchange and recommended that Jack undergo intensive therapy to capitalize on this initial breakthrough. Schmidt ventured that probably 50 hours of therapy had been circumvented by our evening of mutual risk, trust, and confrontation of Jack's long-standing demons.

Jack and I hadn't connected but a couple times in the intervening years. Now he was married, an attorney with the state and attending a conference in San Diego. Jack told me that since that night some four decades ago, he had continued counseling, spending considerable time and money to stabilize his life. But it was only recently that he'd learned, then confessed to his therapist, that he'd been a victim of incest in his early years, and was presently a member of a support group for survivors of incest. Jack's wound was so deep and severe that he had successfully repressed this trauma his first 44 years.

But now, and Jack was speaking with tears of both sadness and hope: "Tom, I'm no longer an interminable project. I may someday graduate from therapy. I feel I'm on

my way to being a repaired fragment of the Creation. Hallelujah!” he exclaimed. And I could only add my own tearful “hallelujah” to brother Jack’s.

Yes, life is truly about building an altar from the broken fragments of our hearts!

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October 12, 2008