

“Necessary Tensions: Love and Suffering: ‘Let me into your grief...’”

March 28, 2010

Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship

Rev. Bruce Bode

Poetry for bulletin

Don't – don't go.
Don't carry it to someone else this time.
Tell me about it if it's something human.
Let me into your grief. I'm not so much
Unlike other folks as your standing there
Apart would make me out. Give me my chance.

(Robert Frost, from “Home Burial,” North of Boston)

Lighting the Chalice (in unison)

To face the world's coldness, a chalice of warmth.
To face the world's terrors, a chalice of courage.
To face the world's turmoil, a chalice of peace.
May its glow fill our spirits, our hearts, and our lives.

(Lindsay Bates)

Opening Words

This is a new day that has been given to us.
Let us then rejoice in it and be glad.
And let us count our many, many blessings:
Let us be grateful for the incredible gift of life,
For the capacity to see, to feel, to hear, and to understand.
Let us be grateful for this time of fellowship, for work to do, and service to render.
And let us then be especially grateful for the ties of love which bind us together,
giving dignity, meaning, worth, and joy to all our days.

Responsive Reading

MINISTER: Your joy is your sorrow unmasked, and the same well from which your laughter rises was oftentimes filled with your tears.

CONGREGATION: How else can it be? The deeper that sorrow carves into your being, the more joy you can contain.

MINISTER: When you are joyous, look deep into your heart and you will find it is only that which has given you sorrow that is giving you joy.

CONGREGATION: And when you are sorrowful, look again into your heart, and you will see that you are weeping for that which has been your delight.

MINISTER: Some of you say, "Joy is greater than sorrow," and others say, "No, sorrow is the greater," but in truth they are inseparable.

CONGREGATION: They come together, and when one sits alone with you at your table, remember that the other is asleep upon your bed.

MINISTER: You are suspended like scales between your sorrow and your joy; only when you are empty are you at a standstill and balanced.

CONGREGATION: But when the treasure-keeper lifts you to weigh his gold and silver, it is necessary that your joy or your sorrow rise or fall.

(Kahlil Gibran, "On Joy and Sorrow, The Prophet, adapted)

Introduction to Reading

Two weeks ago we read one of Robert Frost's dramatic poems, "The Death of the Hired Man." First in England in 1914 in Frost's second book of poetry titled, North of Boston, the poem consisted of an extended dialogue between a husband and wife in which they gently argued the issue of whether or not to provide food and shelter to a hired man who had showed up at their home in a state of ill-health.

There's a second dramatic poem in North of Boston that also features a dialogue between a husband and a wife, but in this poem, titled "Home Burial," the tension is much greater and the possibility of resolution more difficult. The tension between the husband and wife is set in the context of the death of their first-born child whose grave can be seen from a small window at the top of the stairs in their home.

Like "The Death of the Hired Man," this poem is not written as a play, but lends itself to being read as a play. So, again, this Sunday I've asked two members of our congregation to join me in this reading: David Hundhausen and Deborah Hammond, both of whom have plenty of experience in the theatre. Deborah will read the part of the wife, Amy, and David will read the part of the unnamed husband. I will read the part of the Narrator.

Home Burial by Robert Frost

He saw her from the bottom of the stairs
Before she saw him. She was starting down,
Looking back over her shoulder at some fear.
She took a doubtful step and then undid it
To raise herself and look again. He spoke
Advancing toward her: "What is it you see
From up there always? -- for I want to know."
She turned and sank upon her skirts at that,
And her face changed from terrified to dull.
He said to gain time: "What is it you see?"
Mounting until she cowered under him.

"I will find out now -- you must tell me, dear."
She, in her place, refused him any help,
With the least stiffening of her neck and silence.
She let him look, sure that he wouldn't see,
Blind creature; and a while he didn't see.
But at last he murmured, "Oh" and again, "Oh."

"What is it -- what?" she said.

"Just that I see."

"You don't," she challenged. "Tell me what it is."

"The wonder is I didn't see at once.
I never noticed it from here before.
I must be wonted to it -- that's the reason.
The little graveyard where my people are!
So small the window frames the whole of it.
Not so much larger than a bedroom, is it?
There are three stones of slate and one of marble,
Broad-shouldered little slabs there in the sunlight
On the sidehill. We haven't to mind those.
But I understand: it is not the stones,
But the child's mound ----"

"Don't, don't, don't,
don't," she cried.

She withdrew, shrinking from beneath his arm
That rested on the banister, and slid downstairs;
And turned on him with such a daunting look,
He said twice over before he knew himself:
"Can't a man speak of his own child he's lost?"

"Not you! -- Oh, where's my hat? Oh, I don't need it!
I must get out of here. I must get air.--
I don't know rightly whether any man can."

"Amy! Don't go to someone else this time.
Listen to me. I won't come down the stairs."
He sat and fixed his chin between his fists.
"There's something I should like to ask you, dear."

"You don't know how to ask it."
"Help me, then."

Her fingers moved the latch for all reply.

"My words are nearly always an offense.
I don't know how to speak of anything
So as to please you. But I might be taught,
I should suppose. I can't say I see how.
A man must partly give up being a man
With womenfolk. We could have some arrangement
By which I'd bind myself to keep hands off
Anything special you're a-mind to name.
Though I don't like such things 'twixt those that love.
Two that don't love can't live together without them.
But two that do can't live together with them."
She moved the latch a little. "Don't -- don't go.
Don't carry it to someone else this time.
Tell me about it if it's something human.
Let me into your grief. I'm not so much
Unlike other folks as your standing there
Apart would make me out. Give me my chance.
I do think, though, you overdo it a little.
What was it brought you up to think it the thing
To take your mother-loss of a first child
So inconsolably -- in the face of love.
You'd think his memory might be satisfied ----"

"There you go sneering now!"

"I'm not, I'm not!
You make me angry. I'll come down to you.
God, what a woman! And it's come to this,
A man can't speak of his own child that's dead."

"You can't because you don't know how to speak.
If you had any feelings, you that dug
With your own hand -- how could you? -- his little grave;
I saw you from that very window there,
Making the gravel leap and leap in air,
Leap up, like that, like that, and land so lightly
And roll back down the mound beside the hole.
I thought, Who is that man? I didn't know you.
And I crept down the stairs and up the stairs
To look again, and still your spade kept lifting.
Then you came in. I heard your rumbling voice
Out in the kitchen, and I don't know why,
But I went near to see with my own eyes.
You could sit there with the stains on your shoes

Of the fresh earth from your own baby's grave
And talk about your everyday concerns.
You had stood the spade up against the wall
Outside there in the entry, for I saw it."

"I shall laugh the worst laugh I ever laughed.
I'm cursed. God, if I don't believe I'm cursed."

"I can repeat the very words you were saying:
'Three foggy mornings and one rainy day
Will rot the best birch fence a man can build.'
Think of it, talk like that at such a time!
What had how long it takes a birch to rot
To do with what was in the darkened parlour?
You couldn't care! The nearest friends can go
With anyone to death, comes so far short
They might as well not try to go at all.
No, from the time when one is sick to death,
One is alone, and he dies more alone.
Friends make pretense of following to the grave,
But before one is in it, their minds are turned
And making the best of their way back to life
And living people, and things they understand.
But the world's evil. I won't have grief so
If I can change it. Oh, I won't, I won't!"

"There, you have said it all and you feel better.
You won't go now. You're crying. Close the door.
The heart's gone out of it: why keep it up?
Amy! There's someone coming down the road!"

"You -- oh, you think the talk is all. I must go --
Somewhere out of this house. How can I make you ----"

"If -- you -- do!" She was opening the door wider.
"Where do you mean to go? First tell me that.
I'll follow and bring you back by force. I will! --"

“Necessary Tensions: Love and Suffering: ‘Let me into your grief...’”

Introduction

This is the fourth sermon in a series dealing with what I am calling “necessary tensions” or “polar tensions” in life – tensions that are inherent in reality itself, unavoidable tensions, and tensions which if avoided, evaded, or unrecognized cause pain and problems beyond what is required by nature.

If we refuse to move with the natural and necessary back and forth rhythms of the polar tensions in our lives, we add psychological and spiritual tension to what is already a natural tension. And, of course, much of our human pain is the unnecessary psychological, spiritual, and emotional pain that comes from fear and anxiety related to not moving with the natural rhythms of life.

The necessary tensions I've discussed to this point in this sermon series are the tensions between separation and unity, practicality and liberality, and tradition and innovation. In each case, I'm suggesting that these realities belong together, that *together* they comprise a larger whole of life and being, and that to treat them as if each were independent and not tied to the other is not in accord with nature.

Thus, if you break the tension between the two poles, you ruin the values and qualities of each. For example, tradition without innovation becomes empty form, while innovation without tradition lacks substance. You need both *and their relationship* to have either.

Love and suffering

This week I'm dealing with an issue that to me doesn't quite fit into this category of being a necessary tension in the same way that my previous subjects have. My subject this morning is love and suffering or love and grief. The idea is that with the loss or ending of a love there will be suffering – and there should be grief.

The broader category here is attachment and loss. With the unraveling or loss of any attachment there will be emotional pain and suffering, for which grief is the cure.

And beyond attachment and loss is the broader polar tension between holding on and letting go. There is a time to hold on and a time to let go, a time to be attached and a time to surrender that attachment. Or, as the author of the biblical book of Ecclesiastes says, there is:

A time to seek and a time to lose;
A time to keep and a time to cast away. (Ecclesiastes 3:6)

A more modern rendering of the same polar opposition is from Country and Western singer Kenny Rogers, who in "The Gambler" sang, "You got to know when to hold 'em, know when to fold 'em."

So what I am dealing with this morning is part of the *process* involved in the loss of love or in the unraveling of an attachment.

Home Burial

The poem I've chosen to illustrate this process of love and suffering is Robert Frost's powerfully dramatic poem, "Home Burial," which we heard read a couple of minutes ago.

That title, incidentally, can be read double – not only about the death of a child in the home, but also about the threatened death of the marriage relationship and the destruction of the home.

You might think that because both husband and wife are suffering the same loss that this commonality of loss would bring them closer together. However, that is not always the case. Sometimes a loss brings extra pressure to a relationship, widening and deepening already existing fissures and revealing weaknesses already present.

In addition, suffering and grief, as we heard in the poem, may be felt and expressed very differently by individuals, each person grieving in his or her own way, and leading to misunderstanding, blame, anger, and isolation and separation rather than union and connection.

So let's briefly look at the characters in this drama to see how they play out different aspects of the process of loss in respect to their attachment to their first-born child.

Missing each other

In this drama, the husband and wife miss each other at every turn. The husband needs to talk and to hear his wife talk, perhaps not sure how to express his own feelings in words. The wife, however, refuses to talk and pulls away from her husband, not believing he can feel grief as deeply as she does, and doubting, as she says, whether any man can understand the mother's loss of a child – "I don't know rightly whether any man can."

The husband, for his part, says he is willing to be taught by his wife, but at the same time is not certain how that could happen and thinks he may have to give up part of his masculinity to do so – "A man must partly give up being a man/ With women-folk."

The husband's way of dealing with his loss is to attack it and push through it, to work through it physically. The wife's way is to withdraw into silence and depression. When the husband digs the grave for their child, he throws the gravel high into the air again and again, as in a catharsis, which the wife completely misunderstands.

I saw you from that very window there,
Making the gravel leap and leap in air,
Leap up, like that, like that, and land so lightly
And roll back down the mound beside the hole.
I thought, Who is that man? I didn't know you.

And when the husband says, "Three foggy mornings and one rainy day/ Will rot the best birch fence a man can build" – perhaps meaning, "Why make a child that, like the best

wooden fence, quickly decays;” or perhaps referring to a casket he has built. Whatever the case, the wife takes this at a completely literal level, not believing that her husband would be capable of deeper levels of meaning, or so caught up in her own suffering that she couldn’t believe that anyone else could possibly be suffering like she was.

Three weeks ago when we listened to the tape of Robert Frost introducing the poem “Mending Wall,” he said:

You know what breaks families up as quick as anything? It’s when people don’t understand each other enough to know when one’s hinting and not hinting, taking hints when there’s no hint intended, and missing hints that are intended. That breaks up families. See, I’m a psychiatrist.

And for his part the husband wants his wife to get over the grief of her loss, to move on, and to pick up their relationship as before:

I do think, though, you overdo it a little.
What was it brought you up to think it the thing
To take your mother-loss of a first child
So inconsolably – in the face of love.
You’d think his memory might be satisfied –

But the wife will have nothing to do with getting over this loss. It consumes her whole world. No one else can come close to understanding what she is feeling.

The nearest friends can go
With anyone to death, comes so far short
They might as well not try to go at all.
No, from the time when one is sick to death,
One is alone, and he dies more alone.
Friends make pretense of following to the grave,
But before one is in it, their minds are turned
And making the best of their way back to life
And living people, and things they understand.
But the world’s evil. I won’t have grief so
If I can change it. Oh, I won’t, I won’t!

The husband’s way of dealing with the situation is to want to bring back control into life. And when he can’t, he explodes in anger and with the threat of force. He can’t control the loss of his child, but he will control his wife. He will control his home.

At the end of the drama, when someone is heard coming down the road and approaching their house, the husband is alarmed and wants everything to appear normal and under control. And when the exasperated wife starts out the door, the husband threatens to follow her and force her back into the house.

Where do you mean to go? First tell me that.
I'll follow and bring you back by force. I *will!* –

That need to control was underneath the entire set of exchanges between the husband and wife.

The origin of the poem

How did Robert Frost come to write such a drama?

Frost and his wife, Elinor, themselves had the experience of the loss of their first-born child. This took place in the summer of 1900 when their first-born child, Elliott, three-and-a-half years old, began running high fevers and vomiting. A local doctor, who was seeing Frost's mother, Belle Frost, prescribed digestive pills for the child but they did no good. To confuse matters, Elinor's mother had recently converted to the Christian Science religion, as had Elinor's sister, and she argued with Elinor that a doctor was not needed. What was needed was prayer.

Frost, himself, scoffed at this approach, but initially failed to take any action. Finally, on the evening of July 7, 1900, when their son's condition worsened, Frost called his own physician. Upon arriving, his doctor, barely able to control his anger, said, "It's too late now. The child will be dead before morning."

Stunned, both Elinor and Robert stayed up with Elliott throughout the night and were at his bedside at 4 a.m. when he died.

The experience, of course, was horrific for both of them. Frost blamed himself for Elliott's death because, against his better judgment, he had delayed calling the doctor. It was, he said later, "like murdering his own child." And Elinor, for her part, slipped into depression, saying that if there were a God, he was malevolent.

Nevertheless, one must take care not to read "Home Burial" as a transcript of conflicts and arguments between Robert and Elinor. Indeed, this drama was not written until a dozen years later when Frost was in England. And of its origin, Frost said, perhaps wishing to throw inquirers off, that the idea for this poem came from the recollection of the death of his wife's sister's child.

Clearly, however, the conflicts expressed in the poem were close to Robert Frost. And when he came to writing the poem, it came to him in a burst. He said in an interview, "I was not over two hours with 'Home Burial.' It stands in print as it was in the first draft."

Over his lifetime, Robert Frost was to give about to about a thousand poetry readings. "Home Burial" was never among the poems he read.

(This account of Elliott's death is drawn primarily from Robert Frost: A Life, by Jay Parini, pp. 67-70)

If one loves, one will suffer

Whatever the case may be with respect to how the drama of “Home Burial” played out in Frost’s personal life and marriage, the connection is clear between love and suffering. As this drama demonstrates, love involves suffering. If you are willing to attach yourself in love – to a child, to a spouse, to a place, to whatever – you are setting yourself up for loss and suffering when change and separation occurs, as it inevitably will in our ever-changing world. The price of love is the suffering and grief that takes place at the loss of love.

It is, however, also possible to avoid suffering and grief. But there is a price for this as well. The Rev. Dr. Forrest Church, who died this past September, suggests what the price of avoiding grief is in a book written as he was facing his own death. He writes:

Grief can be avoided. The logic is simple. Distance yourself from profound attachments. Attachments are risky. Lock the door of your affections. Board your windows. Armor yourself. Hunker down safe within your garden. Follow your bliss to some other level. Transcend the tyranny of the ephemeral, where pain, suffering, and grief attend our days. Even dream about death as the solution to life’s pain. To the extent that these strategies work, they do so by parching the love from our hearts. (Love and Death, pp. 10-11)

He continues:

We can be crippled by grief, of course. There is such a thing as psychological suffering, which is any suffering that closes us off from others rather than connecting us to them. You can drown a soul with tears. This is not what I am talking about. I am talking about emptying ourselves that we may be filled, losing ourselves that we may be found, giving away our hearts even though they surely will be broken. And when they are, remembering that pain is a sign of healing, not only physical but spiritual pain as well....

We cannot protect love from death. But by giving away our hearts, we can protect our lives from the death of love. (p. 11)

Finally, he says:

We pay for love with pain, but love is worth the cost. If we try to protect ourselves from suffering, we shall manage only to subdue the very thing that makes our lives worth living. Though we can, by a refusal to love, protect ourselves from the risk of losing what or whom we love, the irony is, by refusing to love we will have nothing left that is really worth protecting. (p. 15)

A larger attachment

I indicated earlier in this sermon that I would be talking about the process involved in any attachment or love – the process of suffering and grief that comes with its dissolution. I also indicated that this process was part of a larger polarity that I identified as “a time to

keep and a time to lose; a time to hold on and a time to let go.” The poet Mary Oliver succinctly summarizes what is involved in this process with the following lines:

To live in this world

you must be able
to do three things:

[first] to love what is mortal; [that is, to attach yourself to what you know is finite and will change, decay, and die]

[secondly] to hold it

against your bones knowing

your own life depends on it; [it’s from love and attachment that meaning and value come in life]

and, [thirdly, the hardest part] when the time comes to let it go,
to let it go.

(Mary Oliver, from "In Blackwater Woods")

What gives one the strength and the courage to let go when that is necessary? The answer is that in addition to the particular loves one has in life, one must ultimately be attached to a larger, ongoing reality that survives the loss of our finite and ever-changing attachments and loves. One must be connected to that which transcends the polar opposition of coming and going, of holding on and letting go.

Or, to put this differently, one must see the polar tension of holding on and letting go as part of the process of larger life and being. It is to this larger reality and process that one must ultimately be attached, however, one names that larger reality – God, Being, Nature, Spirit, Consciousness, Energy. Whatever one names and conceives it, one must be ultimately attached to that which transcends one’s individual loves and losses. Within that larger context one can then give one’s heart in love, even knowing the price of suffering and grief.

An invitation

And this is the process that we now enter into liturgically at this time of the year. Next Sunday is Easter Sunday. Some people are surprised to find that we celebrate Easter in liberal religion. But if one can jump the hurdle of literalism – not really that big a leap – one can celebrate Easter as never before: a celebration of the ongoing renewal of life, the resurrection of the spirit, and a connection with the infinite, eternal, forward-pushing urge that is the root of all being.

However, before the Easter celebration, there is another part of the liturgy, which many people are even more surprised to find in a liberal congregation, namely, Good Friday. Against the flow of the tide, throughout my ministry, I have always valued these Good Friday services. This is because the Easter renewal is not real to me until one has entered the darkness and death represented in the Good Friday drama.

For a number of people I have known over the years, this service, held at the noon hour on Good Friday, is the most meaningful service of the year. Thus, I invite you to join with Beatus Meier and me for our Good Friday service, as well as for our Easter service. In each case, Robert Frost will provide the texts and be our guide as we explore the greatest of life's polar tensions, the tension and connection between death and ongoing life.

Benediction

May the Love that overcomes all differences,
that heals all wounds,
that puts to flight all fears,
that reconciles all who are separated,
Be in us and among us,
Now and always.

(Frederick E. Gillis)

Extinguishing of Chalice

We extinguish this flame,
But not the light of truth,
The warmth of community,
Or the fire of commitment.
These we carry in our hearts
Until we are together again.

(NOTE: This is a manuscript version of the sermon given by the Reverend Bruce A. Bode on March 28, 2010, at the Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship, the fourth in a sermon series on "Necessary Tensions in Life." The spoken sermon, available on CD disc at the Fellowship, may differ somewhat in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)