

“Welcoming What Is”
Rev. Kim D. Wilson
Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of the Poconos
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I remember a time when my children were small, maybe 4 and 7, and I took them to an amusement park. It was a beautiful, sunny day, and the temperature was perfect. Everything seemed to go our way: the lines weren't too long, the rides were fun, the food was good. The thing that really stands out for me, though, is what I realized at the end of the day. NOBODY CRIED. Not the older one, not the younger one, not even me. The kids were happy and excited the entire day. I was in a great mood and enjoyed each moment as the day unfolded.

A day like this happens and we say, “This is so wonderful. Why can't it be like this every day?” Why can't every day be a day when nobody cries?

Everyone should be able to be happy and to experience pleasure. But we also know that to be human is to experience suffering and pain as well as happiness and pleasure. Every religious tradition recognizes this basic fact of life. Mahatma Gandhi said, “Suffering is the badge of the human race.”

In the Hebrew bible, Job suffers tremendously with all kinds of horrible physical afflictions and emotional wounds as God tests him. His faith in God seems to be unshakable. Finally, though, even Job is broken down. “The life in me trickles away, days of grief have gripped me. At night-time, sickness saps my bones, I am gnawed by wounds that never sleep. It has thrown me into the mud where I am no better than dust and ashes. I cry to you, and you give no answer; I stand before you, but you take no notice.” (Job 30:16, 17, 19)

Have you ever felt like this? I sincerely hope that no one here has suffered as badly as Job did. But we can probably all remember times when life was hard. Maybe we were overcome with grief because of a great loss in our lives, or we were struggling in a relationship or trying to deal with a difficult health situation. Maybe we're going through something right now.

When we have a day like the one at the amusement park, and we're feeling happy, it's easy to welcome what is – the reality of our lives. But how do we welcome what is when what is, is not at all what we wanted? Too bad it's not like being in a restaurant, where we can say, "Excuse me, this is not what I ordered. Please send it back. I wanted the meal that's delicious and easy to swallow."

When we're in pain, the first thing we want to do, the most natural thing, is to get away from it. Our society encourages this reaction. People can try to escape from pain in a thousand different ways: through medication, drugs or alcohol. We can also try to avoid pain by making our lives overly busy, stuffing our minds with thoughts about the outside world and other people, spending a lot of time shopping, or watching TV, or using the computer or the smart phone. The possibilities are endless.

In order to welcome, or at least accept what is, as I said in our meditation, it seems that we have to go against our instincts to go over, under, or around our pain: we have to go through it. How we go through it, though, I think, is a very personal process. There is no formula that magically gets everyone through their painful experiences.

Knowing that they are not alone is very important for many people. When I was going through some difficulties some years ago, I had the support of a loving community and I had faith that whatever happened, God, my higher power, would help me day by day to get through it, and I would not be overcome by my fears.

Dr. Mwalimu Imara, who was a scholar, activist and UU minister, wrote this reflection about the importance of a supportive community:

"The human spirit has an enormous resiliency, but it is pushed to its limits by the grief that follows sudden, meaningless, violent deaths...Senseless, violent death not only violates our sense of cosmic justice but generates an outrage that defies all time's healing...Our self-esteem, our sense of worth, dissolves in the pain.

“Yet, when someone is willing to listen and not shrink from our untidy suffering – our raging at family, at God, and at ourselves –their esteem for us begins to repair our own lack of self-regard. Here is the healing support we need to struggle with the suffering...Our spirit’s healing temple is someone’s available, understanding heart...I pray that all who struggle with the pain of grief from sudden, violent death will find the faith and communal support to grow through it to wholeness.”

As we face and move through our suffering, we may even find that our hearts have been opened.

Dominican scholar and teacher Matthew Fox says:

“Facing the darkness, admitting the pain, allowing the pain to be pain, is never easy. But if we fail to let pain be pain –and our entire...culture refuses to let this happen –then pain will haunt us....There is no way to let go of pain without first embracing it and loving it...

“The Japanese poet Kenji Miyazawa...said that we must embrace pain and burn it as fuel for our journey. The image that comes to my mind is...[that] we pick up our pain as we would a bundle of sticks for a fireplace. We embrace those sticks as we [carry] them to the fireplace; then we thrust them into the fire...letting go of them; finally we are warmed and delighted by their...gift to us in the form of...heat...and energy.”

Writer and therapist Cindy Ricardo says that “Staying open in the face of pain is an essential part of the healing process...Pain isn’t the problem; it’s our tendency to react to and resist the pain that creates prolonged and intense suffering...In order to heal, we need to be present, to accept what is happening, and to keep our minds and hearts open to what is happening in the moment.”

One morning, Cindy’s husband woke up with chest pains, and once they got to the hospital, they rushed him into the ER and treated him as a heart attack victim. He was in and out of consciousness, and she remembers feeling dizzy with worry, anxiety and terror. Her surroundings faded into the background as she got

trapped in her reactions, imagining life without her husband. After some time, she says, she had a moment of awareness.

“I became aware that what I was doing –judging, predicting and catastrophizing – was just escalating my anxiety,” she says. She was able to shift from reacting to responding. She is a practitioner of mindfulness, which means focusing on the present experience, pleasant or unpleasant, without either clinging to it or rejecting it. She says, “I did the only thing I could. I...couldn’t control what was happening on the outside but I could respond to what was going on in me. I started by accepting that what I was going through was painful, and that waves of fear and resistance were coming up for me.”

She was able to be for herself what’s called a “compassionate witness,” allowing feelings and thoughts to flow through without judging the experience. As the days went by, she moved between reacting and responding, holding her husband’s hand and comforting him with her presence. In the end, he was diagnosed with a virus that had attacked his heart, and he recovered completely.

Reflecting on her experience, Ricardo writes, “Pain is a part of life. While we can dull the pain and suppress it, we can’t avoid it. What we can do is to help ourselves by approaching pain with understanding and compassion.”

Pema Chodron is a Buddhist nun and teacher, who says, “What you do for yourself –any gesture of gentleness, any gesture of honesty and clear seeing toward yourself –will affect how you experience the world. In fact, it will transform how you experience the world. What you do for yourself, you’re doing for others, and what you do for others, you’re doing for yourself.”

As we heal, we become compassionate healers for those around us.

Michael Fox says, “Pain helps us to understand other people in pain. A healthy experience of pain is always a schooling in compassion. For when a person has suffered deeply even once and has owned that suffering, that person can never forget and never fail to recognize the pain of others.”

Discussion

In the reading by Joy Harjo we heard earlier, she speaks of celebrating life in any way she can, weaving together all that is, playing “through the heartbreak of the tenderness of being until I am the sky, the earth, the song and the singer.”

Ultimately, pain and suffering can transform us so completely that we transcend the separateness of our being and know, at last, that we are one with all of humanity and all that is. May it be so.