

Healing Conversations 2011–Session Three–18 November 2011

**“How Everything Shifts Right Here”
How have things changed in your life?
Has your life, your community, your “address book” shifted? How?**

1. Chalice Lighting/Opening Words: 2 minutes.:

“When we honestly ask ourselves which person in our lives mean the most to us, we often find that it is those who, instead of giving advice, solutions, or cures, have chosen rather to share our pain and touch our wounds with a warm and tender hand. The friend who can be silent with us in a moment of despair or confusion, who can stay with us in an hour of grief and bereavement, who can tolerate not knowing, not curing, not healing and face with us the reality of our powerlessness, that is a friend who cares.”

— Henri J.M. Nouwen, *The Road to Daybreak: A Spiritual Journey*

2. Check-in/Sharing: up to 30 minutes.

Tell us one thing that has changed for you.

3. Topic: TOTAL TIME 60 minutes.

Who, or what have you lost? Who or what have you found?

A. Introduction and Questions: 10 minutes.

1. “And I felt like my heart had been so thoroughly and irreparably broken that there could be no real joy again, that at best there might eventually be a little contentment. Everyone wanted me to get help and rejoin life, pick up the pieces and move on, and I tried to, I wanted to, but I just had to lie in the mud with my arms wrapped around myself, eyes closed, grieving, until I didn’t have to anymore.”

— Anne Lamott, *Operating Instructions: A Journal of My Son's First Year*

2. From Here If You Need Me by Kate Braestrup

Perhaps forty minutes after I had heard the news of Drew’s death, I was sitting in the living room with my friend Monica when the doorbell rang. The seargeant was on the telephone, so Monica sprang to answer it.

A young man stood on the front steps, clad in a spiffy dark suit, his hair neatly combed, exuding a scent of soap and virtue. Holding out a pamphlet, he beamed at Monica. “Have

you heard the Good News?” For a long second Monica glared at him, not sure whether to punch him or laugh hysterically. She compromised by slamming the door.

A few minutes later the doorbell rang again. This time, I answered it. It was my neighbor, an elderly woman I had exchanged no more than a dozen words with in the ten years I’d lived in Thomaston. She had potholders on her hands, which held a pan of brownies still hot from the oven, and tears were rolling down her cheeks. “I just heard,” she said.

That pan of brownies was, it later turned out, the leading edge of a tsunami of food that came to my children and me, a wave that did not recede for many months after Drew’s death. I didn’t know that my family and I would be fed three meals a day for weeks and weeks. I did not anticipate that neighborhood men would come to drywall the playroom, build bookshelves, now the lawn, get the oil changed in my car. I did not know that my house would be cleaned and the laundry done, that I would have embraces and listening ears; that I would not be abandoned to do the labor of mourning alone. All I knew that my neighbor was standing on the front stoop with her brownies and her tears: she was the Good News.

3. How to Give a Blessing by Kathleen McTigue

We’re asked a dozen times a day, “How are you?” Most of the time it’s not a real question and doesn’t invite a genuine answer. It’s more like an alternative “hello,” and we’re well-trained in the ritual response: “Fine, thanks.”

But every once in a while we are asked this question when things are really not fine at all. At those times—when we’re walking around in a little bubble of anxiety or sorrow—something inside us can suddenly balk at giving out the standard, meaningless answer. We are too hungry for an authentic word, too raw to pretend that things are okay.

The morning after my father died, following three days and nights of an around-the-clock vigil with my siblings, I had to go to the grocery store to buy a few things for dinner. When I arrived at the check-out counter and the clerk distractedly said, “How are you?” my brain went blank. I couldn’t say “fine,” or even “okay.” I wasn’t okay. I wasn’t even in my right mind. I was numb, sleep-deprived, and saturated with the mystery of our mortality. That’s the only explanation I have, because to my horror I found myself blurting out a real and honest answer. “I’m not so good,” I said. “My Dad died last night.”

With his hands filled with the apples, chicken, and bread, the poor clerk turned red and started to stammer. The people behind me looked longingly at the check-out lines they should have chosen, the ones that would not have placed them in earshot of the too-much-information lady. I was mortified at having revealed to an unprepared stranger just how not-fine I was. Everyone froze in this moment of uncomfortable paralysis—except the young man bagging the groceries, who had Down syndrome. He stopped moving completely, looked straight at me, and with a little slur and great emphasis said,

“I bet you feel really sad about that.”

The simplicity of that little expression of kindness and solidarity allowed both the clerk and me to escape. “Yes, I do. Thank you,” I said to him, and then I was able to walk out with my groceries and not feel quite so much as though I had just undressed in public. I thought about that encounter for a long time. The young man bagging groceries would be considered disabled, in thought, speech, and movement. Yet he was the only one able to offer what counted in that particular moment: He knew how to give a blessing.

Excerpted from Shine and Shadow: Meditations by Kathleen McTigue (Skinner House, 2011).

4. Reading aloud: “PLEASE LISTEN” (Attached).

Questions for Reflection

- How is it with your family and friends? How have your relationships shifted?
- What are some of the clichés and euphemisms you’ve been hearing? What is the worst thing that somebody has said to you?
- What or who have you found that has been able to keep you company?
- What do we do with the disappointment when others have not been supportive? When others have been critical? When others have behaved badly? How do we recover from disappointment? How do we return to ourselves?
- Have there been any blessings? Any surprises? What or who have you found through this loss?
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B. Silence for Reflection/Writing/Drawing: up to 10 minutes.

Invite the group into 5-10 minutes of silence during which time they are asked to reflect on the questions. Participants are invited to use this time for writing and drawing their responses to the questions if they wish. If another question/aspect of the topic comes up for them, they are welcome to respond to that.

C. Sharing: 40 minutes.

Coaches should invite each person to share their response as they feel moved, rather than clockwise. Give each person equal time to share. If there is time after each person has shared, invite people into a more free flowing discussion of the theme. Coaches may need to repeat the questions, direct the conversation back to the questions, or gently ask how something relates to the questions/theme of the meeting.

4. Check-out: 10 minutes.

Encourage people to check out with a final thought or reflection about the theme (or any other thoughts or reflections about the session) and how having shared and learned about this might impact their life in the week ahead. (Coaches can encourage participants to make a connection between the topic and actions, steps, new directions they might take in their daily lives by going first with the check out for the first couple of weeks and modeling this sort of check-out if they wish.)

**Is there anything anyone said today that particularly moved you? Inspired you?
What will you take with you from today’s session into the week ahead?**

5. Introducing Next Session's Topic (optional): 2 minutes.

If you are sharing the next week's topic questions with your group, now is the time to read them aloud and/or hand them out.

Here is how others have thought about Spirituality and Grief

6. Closing Words (provided) and Extinguish the Chalice 2 minutes.

7. Blessing

Hold onto what is good
Even if it is a handful of earth.
Hold onto what you believe
Even if it is a tree which stands by itself.
Hold onto what you must do
Even if it is a long way from here.
Hold onto life
Even when it is easier letting go.
Hold onto my hand
Even when I have gone away from you. (Native American prayer)

***Total Session Time: 107 minutes** (Sessions are scheduled for 120 minutes so you have a little time for a bathroom break or some wiggle room if one section takes longer. We also assume that you will start about 5 minutes past the hour not exactly on time.)*

HANDOUTS: PLEASE LISTEN

PLEASE LISTEN

Adapted by Alan Taplow, from PLEASE LISTEN! by Dr. Ray Houghton, as published in "The Promise of Green", edited by Deborah Roth.

When I ask you to LISTEN to me -
and you start giving advice
You really have not done what I asked.

When I ask you to listen to me -
and you begin to tell me why I shouldn't feel that way,
My feelings feel trampled upon.

When I ask you to listen to me -
and you seem intent on 'solving' my problems,
You are failing me, strange as that may seem.

LISTEN!

All I ask - Is that you LISTEN.
PLEASE! - not to TALK or DO -
JUST HEAR ME.

Advice is cheap;
A quarter gets me both Dear Abbey and Billy Graham
in the same newspaper, and I can do that for myself.
I'm not helpless -
Maybe discouraged and faltering, but not helpless.

Please try to understand.
When you do something FOR me,
that I CAN and NEED to do for myself,
rather than helping, you contribute to my fear and inadequacy.

But when you accept as a simple fact
that I really do feel the way I say I feel,
no matter how irrational -
Then I can conserve my precious energy.
I then have the energy to get about this business
of understanding what's behind my irrational feelings.

And when that's clear,
the answers become obvious, and the advice becomes unnecessary.
I can make sense of my irrational feelings,
when I begin to understand what's behind them.

SO PLEASE LISTEN AND JUST HEAR ME.

And if you want to - or need to talk,
Wait a minute for your turn, and I'll LISTEN to you.

Healing Conversations Session 3

Questions for Reflection: "How Everything Shifts Right Here"

How have things changed in your life?

Has your life, your community, your "address book" shifted? How?

You are welcome to respond to one, all or any of the questions. If none of these questions speak to your experience, please create your own question and respond to that.

1. How is it with your family and friends? How have your relationships shifted?

2. What are some of the clichés and euphemisms you've been hearing? What is the worst thing that somebody has said to you?

3. What or who have you found that has been able to keep you company?

4. What do we do with the disappointment when others have not been supportive? When others have been critical? When others have behaved badly? How do we recover from disappointment? How do we return to ourselves?

5. Have there been any blessings? Any surprises? What or who have you found through this loss?