

Healing Conversations 2011 – Session Four – 2 December 2011

Here's how others have thought about this? (Spirituality)

1. Chalice Lighting/Opening Words: 2 minutes.

Fault Line

Robert R. Walsh

from *Noisy Stones: A Meditation Manual*, Skinner House Books, 1992

Did you ever think there might be a fault line
passing underneath your living room:
A place in which your life is lived in meeting
and in separating, wondering
and telling, unaware that just beneath
you is the unseen seam of great plates
that strain through time? And that your life,
already spilling over the brim, could be invaded,
sent off in a new direction, turned
aside by forces you were warned about
but not prepared for? Shelves could be spilled out,
the level floor set at an angle in
some seconds' shaking. You would have to take
your losses, do whatever must be done next.

When the great plates slip
and the earth shivers and the flaw is seen
to lie in what you trusted most, look not
to more solidity, to weighty slabs
of concrete poured or strength of cantilevered
beam to save the fractured order. Trust
more the tensile strands of love that bend
and stretch to hold you in the web of life
that's often torn but always healing. There's
your strength. The shifting plates, the restive earth,
your room, your precious life, they all proceed
from love, the ground on which we walk together.

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

What is one thing you did over Thanksgiving (or in the last week) to take care of yourself? It can be tiny. If you can't think of anything, something you wish you had done? It can be tiny. If you can't think of anything, something you wish you had done?

3. Topic: TOTAL TIME 60 minutes.

A. Introduction and Questions: 10 minutes.

A BUDDHIST'S PERSPECTIVE ON GRIEVING

Joan Halifax, Head Teacher Upaya Zen Center

The ultimate relationship we can have is with someone who is dying. Here we are often brought to grief, whether we know it or not. Grief can seem like an unbearable experience. But for those of us who have entered the broken world of loss and sorrow, we realize that in the fractured landscape of grief we can find the pieces of our life that we ourselves have forgotten. Grief may push us into the hard question of Why? Why do I have to suffer like this? Why can't I get over it? Why did this one have to die? Why..... In the tangled web of "Why", we cannot find the reasons or words to make sense of our sadness.

Dying people also can grieve before they die. They can grieve in anticipation of their death for all they will seem to lose and what they have lost by being ill. Caregivers will grieve before those they care for have died. They are often saddened by the loss of freedom and options of those that are ill and the knowledge that death will rob them of one more relationship. Those that have been left behind by the dying are often broken apart by the knowledge that they cannot bring back that which has been lost. The irrevocability of it all often leaves them helpless and sad. And then there is the taste of grief in Western culture which is conditioned to possess and not let go.

We all face loss, and perhaps can accept it as a gift, albeit for most us, a terrible one. Maybe we can let loss work us. To deny grief is to rob ourselves of the heavy stones that will eventually be the ballast for the two great accumulations of wisdom and compassion. Grief is often not addressed in contemporary Buddhism. Perhaps it is looked on as a weakness of character or as a failure of practice. But from the point of view of this practitioner, it is a vital part of our very human life, an experience that can open compassion, and an important phase of maturation, giving our lives and practice depth and humility.

To begin, it is important for us to remember that the experience of being with dying for many does not stop at the moment of death. As a caregiver of a dying person or family member who has been at the death of a relative, we may attend the body after death and offer our presence to the community as they and we grieve. When the details of dying and death are settled, then what arises from the depths of the human heart is the many expressions of sorrow when the presence of loss is finally give the room to be seen and felt. Sometimes grieving lasts not for weeks or months but for years. Frequently the reason why grief is not resolved is that it has not been sufficiently attended to just after the loss of a loved one. Family and friends of the deceased can become consumed by the busyness of the business that happens right after someone dies.

This is one of the great problems that we face in the Western way of dying, that business is so much a part of the experience of dying and death. Survivors often face a complex situation on the material level in the after-death phase. They find themselves looking for

a funeral home, letting friends and family know that a death has happened, and creating a funeral service. Unraveling health insurance, taxes, and the last will and testament also take time and energy at this stage. Later there is cleaning up, dividing and giving away the deceased's property, and other seemingly endless chores of closure. Resorting to the business of death can be a way for survivors to avoid the depth of their own loss.

Like dying, grieving has its phases, and it is important to pass through them. Similar to the phases of dying, grief can be characterized by numbness and denial, anger, great sorrow, depression, despair and confusion. Finally, there can be acceptance and even transcendence as sorrow has opened the door of appreciation and compassion. These phases are similar to those experienced in a rite of passage: separation, transition, return. Grief can also arise as a person is dying. Family and friends as well as the one who is dying can experience what is called "anticipatory grief," the bones of loss already showing. Working with that grief is an important part of what one can do in the care of the dying. In fact, most caregivers have to cross and re-cross this territory of grief in being with living and dying many times in the course of just one person dying.

When my mother died, I received one of the best teachings of my life on grief. I realized that I only had one chance to grieve her. As a Buddhist, I felt I had a kind of choice. On the one hand, I could be a so-called "good Buddhist" and accept death and let go of my mother with great dignity. The other alternative was to scour my heart out with sorrow. I chose to scour. Shortly after her death, I went to the desert with photos of her and several letters she had written my father after I was born. Settling under a rocky ledge, I sunk back into shadows of sorrow. When your mother dies, so does the womb that gave birth to you. I felt that my back was uncovered as I pressed it into cold rock.

Later, I was to walk the Himalayas with a friend who had recently lost his mother. The fall rains washed down the mountains and down are wet faces. In Kathmandu, lamas offered a Tibetan Xithro ceremony for her. They instructed me not to cry but to let her be undisturbed by grief. By this time, I was ready to hear their words. The experience was humbling for me. And when I finally got to the bottom of it, I found that my mother had become an ancestor. As I let her go, she became a healthy part of me.

HINDU THOUGHT ON DEATH

Death is not seen as the final "end", but is seen as a turning point in the seemingly endless journey of the indestructible "atman" or soul through innumerable bodies of animals and people. Hence, Hinduism prohibits excessive mourning or lamentation upon death, as this can hinder the passage of the departed soul towards its journey ahead: "As mourners will not help the dead in this world, therefore (the relatives) should not weep, but perform the obsequies to the best of their power."

From Visnu smti 20.30

THOUGHTS ON A JEWISH PERSPECTIVE ON DEATH AND GRIEVING

There is not a lot of focus on the afterlife but on remembrance – eternity is achieved through memory and through the blessing and responsibility each person still living has to remember and honor their loved ones who have died.

Grief process is structured from specifics of the funeral, (closed casket, placing earth on casket during the burial, 3 day time frame from death to funeral.) The customs around mourning are also structured and specific: wearing, ripped clothing, covered mirrors in the home, sitting shiva for 7 days. There is a slow process of moving back to “normalcy” after grief and a recognition that it takes time – mourners recite the Mourner’s Kaddish for their lived ones for a full year. Anniversaries of the death are always recognized and seen as very important.

English Translation of Kaddish

Let the glory of God be extolled, and God’s great name be hallowed in the world whose creation God willed. May God rule in our own day, in our own lives, and in the life of all Israel, and let us say: Amen.

Let God’s great name be blessed for ever and ever.

Beyond all the praises, songs, and adorations that we can utter is the Holy One, the Blessed One, whom yet we glorify, honor, and exalt. And let us say: Amen.

For us and for all Israel, may the blessing of peace and the promise of life come true, and let us say: Amen.

May the One who causes peace to reign in the high heavens

Reading said at Jewish Memorial Services (and often at Unitarian Universalist ones)

We Remember Them

At the rising of the sun and at its going down We remember them.

At the blowing of the wind and the chill of winter We remember them.

At the opening of the buds and in the rebirth of spring We remember them.

At the blueness of the skies and in the warmth of summer We remember them.

At the rustling of the leaves and in the beauty of autumn We remember them.

At the beginning of the year and when it ends We remember them.

As long as we live, they too will live; for they are now a part of us, as we remember them.

When we are weary and in need of strength We remember them.

When we are lost and sick at heart We remember them.

When we have joy we crave to share We remember them.

When we have decisions that are difficult to make We remember them.

When we have achievements that are based on theirs We remember them.

As long as we live, they too will live; for they are now a part of us, as we remember them.

THOUGHTS ON A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE ON DEATH AND GRIEVING

Heaven/eternity is found through a belief in Christ; there is a sense of death as a return to one's truest home. Grief is for those left behind but not for the one who has died.

The 23rd Psalm (often said at Christian funerals and memorials)

The Lord is my Shepherd; I shall not want.
He maketh me to lie down in green pastures:
He leadeth me beside the still waters.
He restoreth my soul:
He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for His name' sake.

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil: For thou art with me;
Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me.
Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies;
Thou annointest my head with oil; My cup runneth over.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life,
and I will dwell in the House of the Lord forever.

QUESTIONS

1. What are your beliefs or intuitions about what happens when we die?
2. Have things shifted for you in a spiritual sense since your losses?
3. Are there rituals you have found useful, things you have already done or rituals, habits or practices that are on going?
4. Can you invent or imagine any ritual or event that would be helpful to you now? What kind of ritual or event would it be? What aspect of your loss or experience would it address?

B. Silence for Reflection/Writing/Drawing: up to 10 minutes.

C. Sharing: 40 minutes.

4. Check-out: 10 minutes. What – if anything – resonated for you today?

5. Introducing Next Session's Questions: 2 minutes.

Grief can come with Judgment, Shame, Anger, Guilt, Fear ... Who's knocking on your door?

6. Blessing and Extinguish the Chalice 2 minutes.

Grief without attachment is miraculous. When the feeling comes and is allowed to be as it is, there is great beauty there. There is no wasted energy trying to resist, and nothing to tell you things should be different from what they are. It is that grief – pure grief – that holds an unimaginable beauty. It is without the dirty fingers of the controller, and is a full spectrum of feeling untouched by our thoughts and desires. ... Untouched grief is beautiful. ... Questions and their answers cannot be separated. The answers are the questions... Never ask how to deal with grief. Grief is there to teach you how.

~~ from Life Beyond The Image: The Writing Of Takuin Minamoto

QUESTIONS – HEALING CONVERSATIONS SESSION 4
How Have Others Thought About This? Spirituality

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.

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