

*Loss and Renewal***A Message for All Faiths Unitarian Congregation****By The Rev. CJ McGregor****Delivered on September 19, 2021**

I'm speaking on loss and renewal because I know something about loss, and renewal is our worship theme for this month. Any other year, that would be a natural choice for September, because it's a time of transitions and new beginnings. But this year, many of us are reeling from an overwhelming barrage of losses—including the loss of our sense of what's "normal." We've lost relationship, fellowship, a sense of security, and hope. How can we possibly find renewal in the face of all that loss? Franciscan priest and Christian mystic, Father Richard Rohr, says: "Loss and renewal is the perennial, eternal, transformative pattern. It's like a secret spiral: each time you allow the surrender, each time you can trust the dying, you will experience a new quality of life within you."

When I was twenty my father died at the age of 48. When I was 21 my mother died at the age of 50. For a few years following I held so much grief and pain. Unfortunately, I turned to some bad habits as a way to find relief from this darkness. It was a very dark time for me. By "dark" and "darkness," I mean the emotional depths that some people describe as a place with no light. What Rashani Réa called "a hollow space too vast for words ... through which we pass with each loss, out of whose darkness we are sanctioned into being." Darkness is by no means a pejorative term in my book. I believe darkness is fertile soil for growth and transformation. The Sufi mystic, Rumi, had a deep appreciation for darkness. He said: "In the darkest of your moments, wait with no fear." "Life's waters flow from darkness. Search the darkness. Don't run from it." In her book, *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*, Rebecca Solnit says: "Leave the door open for the unknown, the door into the dark. That's where the most important things come from, where you yourself came from, and where you will go."

Grief is a person's spiritual, emotional, intellectual and physical reaction to loss, which can begin before the loss actually occurs and persists until the grief reaction is no longer noticed. People in the helping professions know that a person's experience of grief is short or long, mild or disruptive, mental or physical, depending on both obvious and subtle influences. You have experienced loss. Perhaps a favorite piece of clothing wore out, you moved away from friends, or a parent died. Perhaps you experienced panic, or depression, or despair, or sadness, or nostalgia, or anger, or something else. Maybe you experienced foggy thinking, an absence of emotions, uncontrolled emotions, a loss of appetite, or any number of other sensations. Grieving includes using coping mechanisms to deal with your loss. Not everyone cries, but everyone needs the sphere of love around them. Like many, you may turn inward, reflecting on a picture bigger than you have ever considered before. The Word explains that this happens because what is mortal is put right next to what you want to be immortal in your mind and heart. You sense your own mortality as a new reality, especially in the time of COVID when so many are dying.

Greif is not universal. It is unique and can take many different forms and work differently for each of us. The type of grief we experience varies as does the way we experience it. No two occasions of grief are exactly the same. Likewise, there are no occasions of loss and grief larger than the other. In other words our pain is never greater than the pain of our neighbor.

Kenneth Mitchell and Herbert Anderson, authors of *All Our Losses All our Grievs*, define grief as the loss of someone or something that we value. They describe many kinds of loss. They include material loss, relationship loss, intrapsychic loss, functional loss, emotional loss, and role loss to name a few. It's interesting to think of grieving a loss that has nothing to do with death. Too many times we misunderstand loss and miss the grief others may be experiencing. Think of those among us who have lost their homes, their beloved pets, have experienced the death of a loved one, whose child has moved away to work or to college, or those who have divorced. Think of those among us who have experienced a loss or change in their self-image and have lost the possibilities of what might have been, or have abandoned plans for the future. Think of those among us who have experienced impaired vision, hearing, and limited mobility, have physically changed as a result of illness or disease or think of those who have lost their accustomed place in a social or professional network. Think of those among us who have become unemployed, changed jobs, have moved in to nursing homes or care facilities, who have joined our community coming from afar, leaving their friends and family, and those who have gone back to school changing their role within their family. Think of those who are leaving this beloved community. All of these types of loss, and others, are occasion for us to grieve.

This tension creates an emotional rollercoaster which leaves us unsatisfied and weary. The ride only slows and levels out as you acknowledge the reality of the loss and give yourself permission to experience sadness, loneliness or helplessness. Your intellect may find it hard to believe, but the fact is that when you let go and grieve through the process to the end of the ride, you can walk on your own in the joy of being on solid ground. Many who grieve notice that the story of the loss runs around in their minds in bits and pieces. Perhaps you have experienced this. Some of the bits are accurate memories of what happened, and you can feel badly, even responsible, for the loss. Some of the memories are inaccurate and cause you unnecessary distress. One way to discover the difference, and to be able to put the story "to bed," is to tell the story. Of course, there will be more analysis, and perhaps regrets and resentment. But when we must put the pieces together in a way that helps us overcome any distress. Given time and reflection, we finish the puzzle, and you can enjoy a whole picture, experiencing renewal.

Grieving well "depends on the practices of the community to which we belong" says Mitchell and Anderson. They also tell us that the goals of grieving include these: "to enable a person to live relatively unencumbered by attachments to the person or thing lost; to remake emotional attachments; to recognize and live with the reality of the loss and the feelings occasioned by it." Our role in grieving well depends on our ability and willingness to assist one another to recognize the pain and sorrow accompanied by a loss, to allow one another to experience that pain in a personal way, and to help heal one another so we may reconnect and progress forward.

When my father died my mother was obviously devastated. She couldn't spend time in the family home and was staying with friends of the family. I visited her one evening and she was fixing her hair and putting lipstick on; getting ready to attend a social event with friends. I

remember her weeping because she didn't think she could do it. I also remember her friends telling her to "come on..it'll do you good." They were not willing to recognize the grief and loss present. They were brushing it off because it must have been uncomfortable for them. They were not allowing my mother to recognize her grief and were disabling her ability to grieve and recognize her loss. This practice seriously harmed her. If we do not help others recognize their grief and walk with them through that grief then we risk never arriving to healing, never experiencing renewal.

So, how do we engage these tasks of grieving as individuals and as a community to foster healing? How do we get it right? How do we know our practices as a community allow us to grieve well? First, we recognize that denial may be healthy and work for us temporarily but the long term use of denial will surely fail us and leave us devastated. Second, we recognize that we can't do this alone. Mitchell and Anderson advise us that "although grieving is by its very nature a lonely task, the resolution of grief requires the presence of other persons. The notion that time heals the wounds of grief is only partially true; time alone is never enough to heal the ravages of loss. Full release from the hold that emotions of any kind have on us depends on their being heard. Grieving is in part an interpersonal process, lonely though it may be." Grieving well demands that we act communally to support one another to successfully grieve

As we forge through together we need to be ready to do a few things. I offer these as spiritual practices. We need to recognize that before we can reach out to others we need to come to terms with the losses ourselves. Norman Paul, author of *The Use of Empathy in the Resolution of Grief*, observes that people generally have a strong aversion to letting themselves in for the grief of others. He writes "Before a person can empathize with someone who has those feelings, he [or she] must have been able to accept their existence in him [or herself]. We need to be able to recognize our feelings and suspend or suppress the impulse toward premature comfort as a way of warding off pain." We can also offer respect. Respect for different ways in which people handle loss and grief. We can respect the time it may take some of us to grieve a loss. We can also offer one another the space to grieve. Our community can become a place where we know we will be comforted and held. We need to remember that when we have successfully grieved others may still be struggling and be in need of a supportive network. Maintaining a supportive network for a long period of time will be necessary. We need to offer a listening presence. Mitchell and Anderson tell us that "a grief expressed is not a grief heard unless someone is listening. Our being is validated in being heard. Standing by others at a time of loss means first of all to listen to them, to attend to their anguish, and to be present to them."

The goal of grieving well is to give ourselves permission, take the necessary time, and reach out to one another to pull ourselves back together and make new attachments. May we begin to allow ourselves to recognize loss, hold out our hands and outstretch our arms to offer comfort, and allow our minds and our hearts to listen to the subtle cries for community and support. May we do the hardest work we will ever do, meet on the other side of our grief and celebrate the joy of new relationships, freedom from fear and anxiety, and recognize that we are indeed interdependent beings. As Unitarian Universalist minister Marjorie Bowens Wheatley tells us "In this spirit, we build community and move toward restoration".

No matter how deep our loss, something eventually begins to unfurl within our hearts, often when we least expect it. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. expressed it well when he said, "We must

accept finite disappointment, but never lose infinite hope.” May we be open to the sorrow, to the pain of loss. May we be present for our sorrow and all emotions that arise. May we learn from and transform loss into renewal. What is longing to be renewed in you? There is more love somewhere. There is more love somewhere. Let’s keep on ’til we find it. There is more love somewhere.

May it be so.