

## We Remember

Rev. Ann Kadlecek

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany

Oct 27, 2024

**Story:** *How Night Came Into Being*<sup>1</sup>

**Reading:** *The Cure* by Albert Huffstickler

### Sermon

Today we remembered some of those who became part of our experience, and are still no less a part of our experience. Those knew us, taught us, changed us, loved us, and brought light into our lives.

Those memories bring with them some things we don't get over - love, loss, and grief. All three exist together – unfortunately, we can't have one without the others. That's why even remembering the love is a brave thing to do. It hurts.

Often, other emotions are easier to bear than grief, and so we go there instead – anger isn't much fun either, but it can feel better than grief. Like Yami, our mourning can bring destruction.

Or we distract ourselves with something else, so we can avoid really “remembering.”

I'm pretty good at that one. About a year and a half ago, my dog Pedro died. We'd been together for 15 years – we'd had a lot of fun and adventures, and we went through some stuff together. We were living in Maryland at the time, but visiting Connecticut - and I had no idea when I began that trip that I would return home without him. And when I got home, the very first thing I did was to remove all the dog stuff from my apartment. All four dog beds (which might have been excessive), food, treats, medications, toys, water bowls, leashes – everything went. Some things couldn't be donated immediately, but I boxed them up and stored them away - out of sight, out of mind. I even rearranged the furniture to fill in the gaps and vacuumed up the dog hair. I am not by nature a diligent housekeeper, and the place looked better than it ever had. You would never know that a dog was an integral member of this household just a few days before.

My very human response to that loss was to put things in boxes and rearrange the furniture so the loss and grief were ... out of sight, out of mind, over it, moving on.

There's just one problem. Anne Lamott puts it this way:

“All those years I fell for the great palace lie that grief should be gotten over as quickly as possible and as privately. But what I've discovered since is that lifelong fear of grief keeps

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<sup>1</sup> A Hindu Tale told by D.M. Kartha ©2001. Submitted to the National Storytelling Network by Cristy West [https://storynet.org/how-night-came-into-being/?fbclid=IwY2xjawFbre1leHRuA2FibQIxMAABHcdzuOnfPoJXacQvB3ihssja1CK1Mpo3NxgiY9eaKx-fpFt6wg\\_5EZ42aQ\\_aem\\_PwcMwgM8azzT3aVgiiqzBw](https://storynet.org/how-night-came-into-being/?fbclid=IwY2xjawFbre1leHRuA2FibQIxMAABHcdzuOnfPoJXacQvB3ihssja1CK1Mpo3NxgiY9eaKx-fpFt6wg_5EZ42aQ_aem_PwcMwgM8azzT3aVgiiqzBw)

us in a barren, isolated place and that **only grieving can heal grief**; the passage of time will lessen the acuteness, but time alone, without the direct experience of grief, will not heal it.”<sup>2</sup>

In the immediate aftermath of Pedro’s death, I wasn’t ready for more of the direct experience of grief. In a way, what I did was pretty healthy – it made my apartment livable for me, without him. That frenzied house cleaning was also my version of trying to control something, and to make the grief vanish (or at least lessen) – box it up, put it away, get over it as quickly as possible. I have enough training and life experience to know that’s what I was doing, and that it was not the route to healing, but in that moment, it was what I needed, and it’s OK. We don’t have to leap right into letting the pain be the pain.

But if we want to heal, we have to get there sometime.

Only grieving can heal grief.

In some cultures, this is understood and practiced. In the dominant culture in this country, not as much. As children, many of us receive confusing messages about how to grieve. And many of us are socialized not show emotions – to pretend they aren’t there, to the point that we have trouble accurately naming what we’re feeling, much less letting the pain be the pain.

Here in this community, we don’t offer fixes. I will never tell you that the pain will go away, or time will heal all wounds, or that a loved one is “in a better place.” The first two don’t match my experience, and the last one I have no idea.

But we can – and do – keep each other company, and practice grieving together,  
not in the hope that [the pain] will vanish

But in the faith that we will be changed – so that eventually its shape will fit in.

Alan Wolfelt is a grief counsellor, death educator, and renowned author. He puts this concept a little more clinically: “Your pain exists to ask for your attention, compassion, and expression because these are the approaches that will allow you to integrate your grief over time and eventually heal.”<sup>3</sup>

Our pain exists – not to be ignored, downplayed, boxed up, gotten over - but to ask for our attention, compassion, and expression. It asks us to notice what is, to be gentle with ourselves and others, and to - in some way – name it and experience it. As we did through ritual today, or when we express grief in other ways - writing, art, music, movement, talking to people.

We can overdo it. There’s a lot to grieve. All the names spoken today, and those we didn’t speak. There’s grief for the loss of dreams, possibilities, health ... maybe a sense of security. For the country we perhaps used to think we had, the state of the world at large, all the human suffering. For the planet itself. Our personal losses take place in this larger context and it can get overwhelming.

Paying attention to all of it at once is too much for anybody. It’s OK to put some of it in a box for a bit, while coping with the rest. But that pain – your pain - asks for your compassionate attention as you are able. It asks us to remember, speak the names, let the pain be the pain, and – eventually, as it fits in - find a way to carry some of the light of those we grieve with us into the world.

This is how we heal. And how we in turn bring healing to the world.

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<sup>2</sup> Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith* (Pantheon Books, New York), 1999, p. 68.

<sup>3</sup> Alan Wolfelt. *Understanding Your Grief: Ten Essential Touchstones for Finding Hope and Healing Your Heart* (p. 64). Companion Press. Kindle Edition.

For we are part of an infinite web of life and love. We are connected to all that is. People have always experienced, and will always experience, love, loss and grief, and everyone copes with the skills they have. Each of us learned how to cope from those around us – who in turn learned from the people in their lives. And there are people, now, learning from our choices about what we do with our pain.

This larger perspective of our connection to all that is invites some compassion for ourselves and others in our responses to grief and loss, as well as gratitude to anyone who may have taught us well. And it invites us to notice what we're teaching those around us – are we showing them how to put pain in a box, or channel it into anger, acting out, or distractions, or are we showing them how to heal by letting the pain be the pain, in the faith that it will, eventually, fit in?

Our choices matter – for us and beyond us.

The larger perspective of our connection to all that is also reminds us that we are not in this alone. That's a core message of Unitarian Universalism, and indeed most religions. You are not alone – through the shared experience of love and grief that extends through time, we have a lot of company, even when it feels like we don't.

I did finish giving away the dog stuff in those boxes. Most of it, anyway. But before I did, I opened them again. I took each item out, held it in my hands, and remembered. And just a few of those items ... I kept, in the faith that they, and the loss, would eventually fit in.

And, a year and a half later, I had finally adapted to the shape of that loss enough to bring a new dog into my life. Her name is "Promise."

Healing is not about going back to what was, or getting over anything. It's about growing:

Letting the pain be the pain

in the faith that our life will expand – that we will be changed - and it will fit in.

May we ever more, let it be so.

Amen.