

We Remember
Rev. Ann Kadlecek
First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany
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Story The Tenth Good Thing About Barney by Judith Viorst

Reading *Downpour* by Billy Collins

Reflection

So many have been swept away, says the poet. It is good, sometimes, to pause and make a list and – intentionally - remember. Perhaps speaking names and lighting candles. Or walking slowly through the parking lot in the rain while feeling their presence. Or planting seeds and sharing 10 good things.

There are lots of ways to remember, and our rituals (that help us to remember) vary. So do the ways we imagine those we remember. Unitarian Universalism doesn't give us any specific post-death imagery, but humans like to take big mysterious things and make them more concrete, more manageable. Some picture heaven (perhaps with angels and tuna and cream); others the ground. We might think of the dead as part of a cycle in which death brings into being new life and beauty - the cat and the flowers. Or the poet's vision of the friends who have died gathered in a circle, extending compassion to one another. No image will fully capture this mystery - but if there's one that evokes a truth that resonates for you, by all means use it in your remembering.

Whatever the imagery, in our remembering, we have an experience of what author Robin Wall Kimmerer refers to as the "interplay of love and grief." I like that way of putting it – the interplay of love and grief. It's not a progression in which one replaces the other – both are always there – each inspiring and drawing from - the other.

Kimmerer speaks of that interplay as coming about through a "really acute sense, not only of the beauty of the world, but the grief that we feel for it." She says "That we can't have an awareness of the beauty without also a tremendous awareness of the wounds; that we see the old-growth forest, and we also see the clear cut. We see the beautiful mountain, and we see it torn open for mountaintop removal."¹

She's speaking of the earth, but there's a broader truth here. When we love anything or anyone, a little piece of us is already grieving the future loss. And when that loss comes, we grieve because we love. Love and grief always go together.

We might be experiencing an interplay of love and grief for our country. We might be experiencing love and grief for some of our old comfortable understandings of the world, or ourselves; or for a relationship we care about. We might experience love and grief for a home we had to let go, for a body or brain that can't do everything it once did. We've been focusing in this service on the loss of other beings dear to us, but the same interplay of love and grief is found in all sorts of losses.

And it's not all sad. Wherever we love and grieve, that interplay brings with it, Kimmerer says, the possibility of a "transformation ... to even stronger love."²

¹ <https://onbeing.org/programs/robin-wall-kimmerer-the-intelligence-of-plants-2022/>

² Ibid

A love that is made possible by the grief. The poet David Whyte says:

Grief is a great gift.

I love the way it keeps my heart soft.

I love the way I see it in your eyes,

in the eyes of all [who are] walking this Earth.

It is a hallmark of the unclouded Light of human-being-ness.

Please don't tell me to get over it.³

It's pretty rare for me to think of grief as a great gift – certainly not when I'm experiencing it deeply. But it can, if we let it, ... keep the heart soft, and bind us together, as we recognize it in one another. And there, we might perhaps transform to that even stronger love.

This is what those of us who grieve (which is to say those of us who are alive) get to do. Together.

Paul Kalanithi was a neurosurgeon who was diagnosed with stage IV lung cancer at age 36. He wrote about his experience in the book "When Breath Becomes Air," which he almost finished before his death, 22 months later. His wife Lucy completed the book. She says that when Paul was diagnosed, he said to her, "It's going to be okay." She says: "[that] didn't mean that we could cure his illness. Instead, we learned to accept both joy and sadness at the same time, to uncover beauty and purpose both despite, and because, we're all born and we all die."⁴

Lucy goes on: "Engaging in the full range of experience, living and dying, love and loss, is what we get to do. Being human doesn't happen despite suffering. It happens within it."

"Our job ... is to help each other through. That's how we make it OK, even when it's not."

Helping each other through is a pretty good job for a person.

So let us remember, intentionally, deeply, and together, all the Saints of memory that we carry with us. May we say their names, tell their stories, and engage fully in the interplay of love and grief.

So that, helping each other through, we might continue to process death into life, and grief into an even stronger love.

May it be so.

Amen

³ <https://thisunlitlight.com/tag/david-whyte/>

⁴ https://www.ted.com/talks/lucy_kalanithi_what_makes_life_worth_living_in_the_face_of_death