Could you use the shelter of a wing? That image spoke to me this week, as I found myself a little depressed or sad or something – turns out I was coming down with a bug, which I’ve recovered from, I’m happy to report. It always amazes me how the body and mood inter-are – to use Thich Nhat Hanh’s term from a couple weeks ago. How our bodies, home to the brain, respond to thoughts and feelings, factors external and internal. How sometimes, when our bodies are hurting, our minds provide a reason to be in pain – which, in different times, might not affect us quite so dramatically.

There’s always plenty of news, national and international, to justify a foul mood or grief, depression, sadness, anger. Which is why we have to turn off the news on occasion, to regain our center. But sometimes, tragedy strikes, not just in other parts of the world, but in our own families, our own lives.

You may know about the recent, unexpected death of Pastor Jim Stender, pastor of St. Andrew Lutheran Church. Many of you knew him as the face of the Winter Hospitality Overflow program, providing shelter for homeless women and children, which many of you were volunteering for over the last week. So, I am sure that his death was a shock and sadness to many of you.

Our theme this month is love, and we can’t explore the topic of love without exploring loss. Because it is love that makes loss so painful.

I’ve been thinking of those in Pastor Stender’s congregation who were preparing to say a planned goodbye to him as he had announced his impending retirement, who are now reeling from the shock of an unplanned and permanent farewell. Thoughts of congregations losing their minister to death always reminds me of a 4th grade class whose teacher died over a December weekend – and how it must have felt to them to learn their beloved teacher would not return. That teacher was my sister’s husband, and though he died over twenty years ago now, the shock and grief return from time to time, when similar deaths trigger the reminder.

When we are hit with tragic news, such as this week’s shooting in Aurora, Illinois, we rush to try to make meaning out of the event as a way to move on. That is our tendency, our nature.

However, I believe it’s a tendency that must be resisted for as long as possible. Making meaning out of such meaningless tragedies is one way to sidestep the painful reality of suffering, and the hard work of mourning what has been lost.

Tragedies like this one trigger in us, if not already present, all the personal tragedies that make up our lives. New grief triggers old griefs. I don’t think it is always conscious, but I do think it is commonly present.

It is not my theology that everything happens for a reason. We can do some reasoning, later, however, about what has happened, and, I believe, come out the other end of a tragedy wiser, deeper, and transformed. But it doesn’t happen in order for that to occur. I happen to believe that terrible things just happen in this world, and that to be human is to experience the pain that comes with tragedy.
Early in my ministry with the congregation in Lansing, MI I met John Schneider, a former member who had been board president. He was living at that point in Traverse City and has since died. He offered a workshop for ministers about grief and depression. It was my first year serving a congregation. It was his belief—and he convinced me—that much of what gets diagnosed these days as depression, is really unresolved, unfelt, un-dealt with grief.

Grief, he says, tests our integrity. Our temptation is to avoid the fullness of the experience. It hurts. We are hardwired to try to avoid pain. And yet the only way to healing is through the pain. Through it. As Quinn explained so eloquently this morning. It’s hard. If we try to sidestep it, distract ourselves from it—you’ve heard the advice: keep busy, go on with life, get over it, hurry up, - if we take that advice and refuse to do the grief work necessary, then it will all come back on us again and again and again. Grief, he says, last as long as it needs to, and always longer than others want it to.

John Schneider names the work of grief as coming to terms with what’s lost, what remains, and what’s possible.

What’s lost:

One thing that is lost is our innocence. There’s a poem by Maggie Smith I almost chose as our reading today with this great line: “The world is at least fifty percent terrible, and that’s a conservative estimate, though I keep this from my children.” When tragedy strikes, we can’t keep it from our children.

Many of us still live with the inherited notion, largely unconscious belief, that somehow if we’re good enough, work hard enough, heroic enough, that tragedy cannot touch us.

There is a societal inclination (inherited honestly from our Western religious tradition) to believe that those who suffer somehow deserve their suffering. We don’t all buy into that belief, but the shackles are hard to break.

Honestly, my back hurt early in the week, and I was blaming myself for having brought it on myself, moving wrong, sitting too long, exercising without warming up. Only once others reported suffering from the flu, did it dawn on me that my body was fighting an infection.

“She brought that onto herself.” You know the thinking—rooted in a protective psychological device to shelter us from the knowledge that life hurts, and that the hurt could possibly reach us. That heroes of our culture, those who have made it in society, made it to the top, do work that is universally respected, that advances the cause of humanity, if tragedy can touch them, well, then, it could happen to anyone, including me.

Until recently, Unitarian Universalist churches have mostly appealed to middle-class and well-educated people. Predominately European American, race and class have both been barriers for people who might otherwise embrace this faith tradition. One reason is that we have historically preached that individuals, despite the odds, can pull themselves up by their bootstraps. It’s called “salvation by character” in our tradition and harkens back to the early Unitarian rejection of the degradation of humanity, while inadvertently embracing Calvinistic notions that riches are the sign of salvation. If you are middle-class, well-educated, white and making it, then you can live in that myth more easily. If you are poor or a person of color, or uneducated, and living on the edge, then the belief that you brought this upon yourself, somehow, doesn’t fit. You know it’s not true. It doesn’t make sense, and you don’t know how to reconcile it with your life. So, a split in
religious viewpoints along class lines, which, I believe, we religious liberals can change with our deepening understanding of the tragedy of life and some serious grief work.

In the meantime, our innocence is lost.

**What’s left:**

What’s left will differ depending on the loss. Quinn is left with a continued belief in love and ability to love, despite the loss of a particular love. The congregation that Pastor Jim Stender served are left with each other and their belief in God. From Psalm 46:1 “God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble.” These are no small things.

What’s left is our memories of love, our memories of those we have lost, by death, by circumstance, by time. We’re left with more than memories. We left with the changes we have undergone because we have loved, we’re left with all we’ve learned. We’re left with those who remain, the others who surround us in love.

**What’s possible?**

Wow. What’s possible is a very exciting step. That’s where grief leads to transformation. However, I approach this question with hesitation because we will only get to this question by going painfully through the other steps. Rushing to this question will insure it’s not happening.

When you ask what’s possible, you are, as Schneider teaches, Resolving the loss (letting go and saying goodbye), Reformulating loss in a context of growth (regaining curiosity), transforming loss into new levels of attachment (greater capacity for growth in love, creativity, wholeness)

In the meantime, grief, Schneider says, lasts as long as it needs to, and always longer than others want it to. Family members who are being interviewed days after the tragic shooting in Aurora are being actively thwarted from grieving. It makes it very hard to allow the fullness of your pain to seep in, when you are being asked to hold it together for national television.

But that doesn’t mean these family members will not do the hard work of grieving well.

I’ve walked you through the three steps of grief. What’s lost, what’s left, and what’s possible. However, this sermon is not over. Because it is easier to recognize grief when someone you love has died. That doesn’t make it any less painful, but at least we know we are grieving.

But there are other kinds of love that, when lost, cause us pain. The loss of a Sophie for a child, the loss of identity upon retirement or the birth of a child, changes of all sorts.

In my first year of ministry, about half-way through that first year, I found myself dropping balls left and right. A missed appointment here, booking two speakers for the same slot there. None of these dropped balls would seem very important by themselves, though the individuals I neglected surely noticed, and the whole pattern of them was beginning to get to me. I was easily distracted. In fact, I felt like an ad for Prozac:
“Do you have a hard time enjoying the things you used to? Do you frequently feel overwhelmed? Have uncontrollable feelings of guilt or low motivation? Find it difficult to concentrate? Notice that you’re sleeping too much or too little? Many of the signs of depression are easy to miss. These symptoms are often your mind’s way of telling you something is wrong. They can be part of everyday life, or persistent signs of medical illness. Sometimes depression can be triggered by serious life events like death or divorce. Many times it can appear in someone’s life for no apparent reason. If you think you might be depressed take our quiz and discuss your symptoms with your doctor today.”

That’s a real ad for prozac, a medication frequently prescribed for depression. And even though I had done a lot of grief work in my life to that point, the pressures were getting to me and I was losing perspective. I was beginning to have that nagging feeling that I was depressed. And worried about what the church does when the minister is depressed, before she can get the help she needs. Part of my role is to people who are depressed, and what good will it do if I’m so deep in my depression that I can’t provide any perspective for others? Fortunately, I had this minister’s meeting to attend which, frankly, I had no interest in going to. I had no idea who John Schneider was, and I thought I’d be better off staying in town and getting some work done. But I went, begrudgingly, fortunately. John reminded me of things I already knew, but that our culture doesn’t tell us.

Listen to this sentence from the prozac ad again: “Sometimes depression can be triggered by serious life events like death or divorce”

Serious life events, death and divorce, moving, changing careers, cause grief, not depression. Now complicated grief, unchecked grief, can lead to depression. But it is not the event itself – the mass shooting in Aurora, or the death of a beloved pastor that causes depression. It’s the fact that, for whatever reason, the survivor is not allowed to grieve. The true test of the difference between depression and grief is how the individual responds to healing conditions. The grieving person thrives when healing conditions exist. They may be skeptical about growth and transformation, “but they are often willing to let someone else hold their hope for them while they descend into the dark night of the soul that grieving frequently contains.” The depressed person often cannot take advantage of such healing conditions. And I want to make sure I state clearly, that if you are depressed, professional help is needed. And, if you are grieving, it is possible find the healing conditions to help you through this period and come out the other end.

The ministry, I sometimes declare, is professional grief work. My grief work was not done after that first hard year of ministry. I find that it never is. But it is made tolerable by the knowledge that I have experienced pain before and will survive it again. Grief occurs even when all the changes are seemingly good ones. And that, in part, makes it hard to recognize.

It is why I forgot to notice that first year of ministry – some 17 years ago, that I was grieving. I didn’t regret having moved to Michigan, becoming a minister, or serving that church. But just because I welcomed all these changes into my life, it didn’t mean that I didn’t miss Chicago, or the student lifestyle, or my extended family out West. Both were possible and both were true. It was because of love that I felt such loss.

And it’s been no different these first years in a new place and a new ministry – just because I welcomed all these changes into my life, didn’t mean that I don’t miss all that came before. We feel grief at loss because we love. And as A. Powell Davies said, “an open heart never grows bitter.” So, it’s important to take Quinn’s advice and choose to love again.
“If you will hold me until morning, I promise I will rise and light the fire and break the bread and put back on my shoulder my corner of the world. But for now, I could use the shelter of a wing.”

A grieving person thrives when healing conditions exist. Grief is the other side of love. When we answer the call of love each day, we will suffer loss, we will grieve – and when we do, may we do it feel it fully, with increasing curiosity and a greater capacity for love. Despite the pain, ah – maybe even because of it – emboldened by faith, may we answer the call of love.

_Benediction_

What’s Lost: This hour we’ve been together is over. What’s Left: the love that gathered us remains. Let the possibility of a deeper love be with you this week until we meet again...

*Sermons are meant to be spoken and not written. I have not edited this sermon to written form.*