

Dancing in the Darkness  
By Rev. Meghan Cefalu  
December 7, 2008 – UUCM

*Readings:*

*The Well of Grief* By David Whyte from *Close to Home*

*Those who will not slip beneath  
the still surface of the well of grief  
turning downward through its black water  
to the place we cannot breathe  
will never know the source from which we drink,  
the secret water, cold and clear, nor find in the darkness glimmering  
the small round coins  
thrown away by those who wished for something else.*

*Eckhart Tolle from A New Earth*

*"The surrendered state of consciousness opens up the vertical dimension in your life, the dimension of depth. Something will then come forth from that dimension into this world, something of infinite value that otherwise would have remained unmanifested. Some people who surrendered to severe limitation become healers or spiritual teachers. Others work selflessly to lessen human suffering or bring some creative gift into this world."*

Yesterday my husband, Chris, and I were having breakfast with his parents in a little café in Petaluma. Chris was really taken by the amazing artwork displayed on the walls of the café, he couldn't stop looking at the images. His father knew the story about the artist. The very talented young woman was raised in Petaluma and was much beloved in the art community. Tragically, she was hiking in the Marin Headlands last spring when she slipped and fell off a cliff and was killed. She was only twenty years old.

When he discovered that the pieces were affordable and for sale at a shop that we would pass on the way to our car Chris decided to buy one of the prints.

The shop owner began showing us the collection of the artist's work. We were really blown away by the haunting beauty and poetic nature of each and every piece. In the course of the conversation the woman revealed to us that she was the artist's mother.

I was stunned for a moment. I told her just how sorry I was for her loss. And that having lost a child to such a tragedy must be just awful. She said, rather matter-of-factly, "being alive is torture."

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Today is the second Sunday of Advent, the four week Christian liturgical season anticipating the arrival of the Christ child. The coming of a Christ-like figure in many religions portends the coming of peace on earth. Advent celebrates the time of waiting, hoping and preparation for this momentous event.

It is not a coincidence that this Christian season occurs simultaneously with the weeks leading up to the darkest day of the year. On the winter Solstice, at least in the northern hemisphere, night finally overtakes the day, but only for a moment. The earth begins to tilt back and the days will once again grow longer.

For hundreds of years in Pagan communities this has been a season of feasts and festivals where people have lit bonfires, candles, torches and lamps to herald the return of the sun. Perhaps more than at any other time of the year, people would gather together to sing and dance, and tell one another stories over celebratory meals.

It is a time of hope, of light amidst the darkness and anticipation of good things to come.

I think it is important to acknowledge that this is also a time of sadness and grief. The holidays invite a sense of longing and nostalgia for times long gone or times that have never been. The sparse sunlight, chilly winds and long-drawn-out nights further aggravate people's inclination towards melancholy.

Of course, all of us periodically have pain in our lives. Sometimes the pain is psychological as in sorrow, confusion, or anxiety. Then there is the physical pain that is part and parcel to having a body.

The only thing anyone wants from pain is for it to stop. With any type of hurting comes a instinctive response to block, resist, push away, ignore, deny or disassociate from the discomfort. At some point early in our lives we discovered that those reactions helped to keep us safe.

I have come to believe that the way to actual healing comes about when we begin to notice our resistance and then slowly, and very gently begin to allow and even explore our uncomfortable sensations and emotions.

An image comes to mind of a person standing in a river. He can resist the current of life that is ever flowing all around, resolutely standing his ground. Or he can allow himself to be moved and carried along by the stream.

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As I was thinking of what I would say to you today about experiencing our places of sadness and pain I remembered my own mourning when my father died.

I thought of Joanna Robinson, Utah Phillip's widow. She has shared with me that since Utah died there have been times her grief has shaken her to her very core.

I thought of Bernell Scott's aching heart after losing Don just a week ago. Several of our members have lost parents or siblings in the last year.

In his book "A Grief Observed" C.S. Lewis explores his grief after losing his wife to cancer. He writes, "...there is nothing we can do with suffering except to suffer it. There is no device which will make pain not be pain."

Those words from the bereaved mother of that young artist kept ringing in my ears, "being alive is torture."

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In Buddhism the first of the Four Noble Truths states that the essence of life is suffering. The Buddha's original word in Pali is "dukkha". Dukkha is inadequately translated most often as "suffering". But to understand the concept more completely we should include words like, "intolerable" "difficult to endure" "imperfect" "unsatisfying" or simply "incapable of providing perfect happiness".

To live means to suffer, because human nature is not perfect and neither is the world we live in. During our lifetime, we will not avoid physical suffering such as pain, sickness, injury, old age, and eventually death. It is also inevitable that we will endure emotional suffering; sadness, fear, and disappointment.

Dukkha means not only the agony of the body. It also means that deep subtle sense of unsatisfactoriness which is a part of every moment.

Buddhist monk Henepola Gunaratana says, "Take any moment when you feel really fulfilled and examine it closely. Down under the joy, you will find that subtle, all-pervasive undercurrent of tension, that no matter how great this moment is, it is going to end. No matter how much you just gained, you are either going to lose some of it or spend the rest of your days guarding what you have got and scheming how to get more. And in the end, you are going to die. In the end, you lose everything. It is all transitory."<sup>1</sup>

If that sounds hopelessly depressing you'll be glad to know that the other three Noble Truths explain what causes suffering and how we can ultimately overcome it.

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I see a great deal of wisdom in the David Whyte poem that Sharon read earlier. The imagery of slipping "beneath the still surface of the well of grief...to the place we cannot breathe" – is so powerful and true. Those of us who have experienced deep grief know that sensation. Where the chest is so heavy that the breath comes only with measured effort. The ache in the heart threatens to crush out all the air. There is a physical aching in your very core. This is not a place we want to be.

But the poet says that those who refuse to go there "will never know the source from which we drink". In our anguish we come to realize that we all drink from a common cup - suffering is a universal human experience. We are not alone. And it seems the more deeply we love the more we ache at loss.

He says that those who slip into that deep clear water will "find in the darkness glimmering the coins thrown away by those who wished for something else." I understand that to mean that when we surrender to these waters, rather than bolting the door and wishing for something else, we open ourselves to the possibility of true healing. We discover our own deepest strength, a creativity and power that we were not aware we had that helps us get through to the other side.

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<sup>1</sup> 'Mindfulness in Plain English' by Henepola Gunaratana

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I want to share a story that illustrates something that happened to give me a slightly different angle on pain. Years ago I was in a car accident. I was rear-ended while stopped at a red light by a big, old, heavy car that was going thirty-five miles an hour. My car was totaled, and so was my neck.

After a few weeks of applying ice and taking large doses of Advil I began working with a physical therapist to get my strength and range of motion back.

During our sessions together he would have me move my head in various directions to stretch out the scarred tissues in my neck. It was extremely painful.

One day in his office while I was stretching and grumbling about the pain he interrupted and asked me to describe the sensation I was having.

I said, "It is pain. It hurts".

He laughed a little and said, "Right, but can you tell me specifically what it feels like? Is it sharp? Hot? Throbbing? Is it constant or is there space between the pangs? Did the quality change?"

So I closed my eyes, turned my focus to the pain and gave him a running commentary. "Now it is sharp and runs down my arm like electricity. Now it is gone. Oh, no it's back. Now it feels hot. Okay, it is gone for a moment.... Still gone. Now it is back but it is a little smaller...and higher. Wait, now its gone again."

When I consciously allowed myself to really experience the pain, surrender to it rather than resist it, I found that the pain was not quite as unbearable as I had first thought. My struggle against it was actually worse than the sensation itself.

It still hurt like crazy and if I could have taken a magic pill to make the pain go away I would have. But something about the simple act of sharpening my attention to the sensations actually changed the quality of the pain. And there was a subtle sense of relief that is hard to explain. It was like I let go and allowed the river to carry me a while.

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I have to tell you now that if my late grandfather could hear this sermon he'd probably say it was a bunch of wishy-washy, weak-minded hooey. He, like most men in his generation, was raised to "tough it out" in the face of whatever tragedy or hardship befell him. A strong person in his mind was someone who did not complain or talk about his or her feelings and would sooner be dead than cry in front of another person.

I know that he believed that by being "tough" through hard times he was doing the best possible thing for his family.

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"Being alive is torture". Those words uttered by that grieving shop owner keeps playing in my mind. The thing that has stayed with me was not so much the words themselves but

rather the simple, matter of fact manner in which she stated them. Her tone of voice did not imply that she was looking for sympathy. There was no hidden self-pity, no martyrdom. It was not really an attempt to engage us, nor was she trying to evade the subject. It was just a fact of her life.

If grief is a river this woman was being tossed around in class-five rapids. She was in it - over her head struggling to just stay afloat. Here she was at this store selling her dead daughter's art to strangers.

She is embodying a true, raw strength that dwarfs my grandfather's "strong silent type" archetype.

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There are times in each of our lives when choosing whether or not we will slip beneath the surface of the well of grief is not an option. Someone we love dies, or we suffer some other great loss and grief overtakes us like a tsunami. Any and all attempts to control the floodwaters are futile. We are knocked off our feet and plunged into dark, turbulent waters.

But most of the time we are faced with the less traumatic aches and pains of day-to-day living, and the general "unsatisfactoriness" of Dukkha that comes with being alive. Many of us carry old wounds from betrayals that happened when we were young and learning to trust the world.

Of course, more than anything, all of us just want our suffering to end, but the ultimate goal is healing, being restored to our wholeness.

In my experience healing comes most completely when we surrender rather than resist. Ironically, bringing attention to painful sensations causes us to suffer less. There is a softening that allows us to pass through to the other side. This is how we will heal and grow stronger.

This is much easier said than done. It can be really scary to poke around at our painful memories and the emotions they carry. It is important to be gentle and to find a safe place before we let our guard down. It often helps to be with somebody we trust. It takes time, courage and patience.

But when the time is right, and we feel safe enough to share our stories and experience our emotions may we begin to notice our hearts opening just a little bit wider.

As the doors to our hearts open wider still may we begin to know for ourselves the truth that suffering is a universal human experience. Like nothing else, it binds us in compassion, love and understanding to other human beings and to the interdependent web of all living things.

Amen.