Grief

BY **DARCEY LAINE**, MINISTER, UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH OF ATHENS AND SHESHEQUIN, PENNSYLVANIA

Each and every person on this earth has experienced loss. We may think when grief comes over us that we are alone in our mourning, that the smiling chatty folks around us don't know…but of course they do. Being alive in this mortal world means knowing loss.

And grief—grief is the process by which we heal those holes ripped in our life through relocation, through divorce, through death. We mammals are designed to feel acutely the loss of one we love; it is a survival mechanism that binds parent to child, that binds together family group and tribe. The more we bring people into our hearts, the deeper the hole they leave if they are taken from us.

I think that we in this age have more trouble with the process of grieving than earlier generations because we expect to move through things quickly. In the Jewish tradition mourners take a week to sit quietly with family and friends and observe their grief. They are not to work and they have no other social obligations during this time. They cover the mirrors in their homes to relieve any responsibility or anxiety about literally "keeping up appearances." For the most acute losses they observe a period of mourning for a year, as a reminder to themselves and their community that grief ebbs and flows long after the religious services are over.

My colleague Craig Schwalenberg describes grief as an ocean, along whose shore we walk. At any time the waves may come in, wetting the bottoms of our feet and receding, or knocking us over with their power, perhaps even pulling us under. When those waves come it is challenge enough if we are in a safe place where we can surrender to our grief, but sometimes they arrive while we are driving our car, at our job, at a dinner party, and we are disoriented, confused, overwhelmed.

Grief takes many forms—it is as variable as humanity itself. Tears and sadness we expect. But other emotions like anger or numbness often take us by surprise, and sometimes go unrecognized as grief. We may even notice guilty feelings if we imagine we are not grieving the "right way." We might be surprised by anger at the person who has left us. Maybe we regret things done or left undone, said or left unsaid. It is common to experience relief when someone who has been struggling for a long time finally dies and has an end to their suffering.

All these feelings are possible and important and real. Counselors during the peak of the AIDS crisis noticed that some folks were losing so many friends and loved ones that they had sort of a grief fatigue; they began to grow numb and felt incapable of grieving any more. Whether it takes the form of tears or irritability, rage or complete numbness and emptiness—all of this is grief, and no one way of grieving is better than another.

We grieve not only relationships that gave us comfort and joy, but also difficult relationships. When we grieve, for example, the loss of a friend or relative from whom we had drifted apart, we grieve not only the loss of what was, but also of what might have been. Perhaps we always assumed that someday we would reconnect, and now we have come to an ending with things still unsaid and undone. We grieve the loss of a future together.

We need to grieve even the loss of those who were abusive to us. Maybe we feel rage for how we were hurt, sadness for the healthy relationship we deserved, perhaps guilt that we had wished that person would finally leave our lives. This kind of compound grieving can be hard to navigate, hard to express. Still, I think the best we can do is to witness each facet as it is uncovered, as it washes over us.

Quest

Vol. LXIX, No. 9 October 2014

Even hundredfold grief is divisible by love.

—Terri Guillemets

A monthly for religious liberals

THINKING ABOUT MOURNING

When waves of grief come, however they come, I believe that the best wisdom is to simply observe it, not to struggle against it, but to let the grief do its work. To let go. When the waves come, small or overwhelming, I encourage you to pay attention, to take the time you need. We don't always have the luxury of saying "I'm taking the afternoon off because I need to grieve." But pull over to the side of the road if you are driving. Stand up from your work and take a walk or find a place to sit undisturbed for a few moments, or a few hours.

> The only cure for grief is to grieve.

The pain of grief is not like the pain of getting your hand too close to the fire, which tells you to pull away. It is more like the pain of a wound healing, which requires time.

Grief is the process of knitting back together those holes, those empty places where our loved ones used to be. We wove them so carefully into our lives, and now that they are gone we feel we may unravel without them. My theology professor told us that after the death of his wife he experienced an acute moment of grief as he was ready to leave a party, and looked around for his wife as he had done at the end of every party for 40 years.

That hole where our loved ones used to be causes us to stumble—to wonder how can we live each day without them. Loss creates a change in the terrain of our lives, and grief is the process of re-forming our lives, transforming them into a new wholeness. Even those waves that drag us under help transform our lives. Those waves are part of the slow process of washing us clean of what is gone, of what we have lost. And so instinctively we struggle, because that pain binds us to what we have lost. Says Dr. Earl A. Grollman, one of the great teachers about death and loss:

> *Grief is not a disorder, a disease or a sign of weakness. It is an emotional, physical and spiritual necessity, the price you pay for love. The only cure for grief is to grieve.*

Lest we be washed out to sea, we need anchors to keep us tethered to all that is still alive and growing in this world. A favorite movie or poem or piece of music can be a tether to bring us back to ourselves. If walking in the woods or gardening restores your soul in ordinary times, you need these things more than ever when you are awash in grief. For some, work can be that anchor, but it can also be a way of blocking out or avoiding grief.

This is not the time for ambitious projects, but for simple actions that pull you back to yourself, like putting your hands in the earth, or in a dishpan of soapy water. A key is not to expect that this time of grieving will be like other times, but to witness and notice. *Today I washed two dishes and even that was hard. Today I walked in the woods and everything reminded me of her.*

The most important anchor is compassion—especially for yourself if you are grieving. When you are not as productive as you might normally be, or patient, or witty, or when you just have trouble putting words together, be compassionate and kind to yourself, as you would to a dear friend who was grieving. Don't let your grief come between you and the people who love you. It can be hard to connect with others when those waves come; it is easy to isolate yourself when you are grieving. Because truly, no one can really understand what you are feeling, and no one can take your pain away. But no living being can survive in isolation, either. We need one another.

Being with one another in grief is difficult. It is difficult because it may bring our own grief back to us in a fresh way. It is hard because we can never really ease the grief of another—only the miraculous restoration of the one lost could truly fill that hole in their lives. It is difficult because we know how tender the heart is when it is grieving, and sometimes we might say or do the wrong thing. Maybe the very thing that would bring comfort to us is painful to our companions.

A colleague once told me a cautionary tale of going into the hospital room of a young man dying of AIDS. She asked him "How are you?" and he replied in fury: "How do you think I am! I'm dying!" The lesson my friend took from this moment is to never ask, "How are you?" But I took a different lesson from it. If we ask how someone is, we must be ready to listen and stay present with however they really are, whether that is rage, sadness, despair or a need for solitude.

Any attempt to smooth over the loss will fail—must fail. Statements like "He's in a better place now," or any variant on "It's for the best," or "Life goes on" are attempts to bring premature closure. Usually it speaks more about the well-wisher's discomfort with the depth of grief than any need of the mourner. Our goal as supportive neighbors, family or friends is not to soothe, not to smooth over, but to be present with the truth of what is.

To say simply to a neighbor or friend, "I heard about your loss," and "I'm sorry," gives the mourner a chance to speak about their loss if they choose, or just to know they can number you among those who will understand if they are not quite themselves. As we are present with our own grief, so we can be present with the grief of another.

We grieve because we are creatures who connect, who love, and therefore we know loss. Writes Wendell Berry: "Grief is not a force and has no power to hold you. You only bear it. Love is what carries you, for it is always there, even in the dark, or most in the dark, but shining out at times like gold stitches in a piece of embroidery." ■

Grief—One Year Later

BY **ROGER BERTSCHAUSEN**, SENIOR MINISTER, FOX VALLEY UU FELLOWSHIP, APPLETON, WISCONSIN

In writing about her mother's death, Meghan O'Rourke suggests, "A mother is a story with no beginning." This is because a mother was always there—from that very first moment of your creation in her body. She's a given, a part of the fabric of your story from day one. In my mom's case, her story having no beginning seems especially true. She was adopted—and never wanted to know anything about her birth parents. So her beginnings were shrouded in mystery. No one knew the story, not even her.

But my Mom's story had an ending. It was an ending that we could all see coming a mile away. And yet, as is common with deaths that ought to have been anticipated, it still felt strangely unexpected when it arrived. Denial is a powerful and sometimes beautiful thing. Maybe in this case it allowed us to take in only what we could handle, one little tidbit at a time.

It feels to me like it's also impossible to anticipate what the journey through grief is going to be like. Even as my mom went into hospice, I didn't know what to expect about the (now officially deemed inevitable) grief to come. This would be the most significant loss in my life to date. How would I respond? I even wondered to myself, *What if I don't cry?* Maybe, because of my work, I've been with so many other people in those moments of death that I've become somehow jaded and won't find the tears. Who knows? (For the record, I did cry. I realized this wasn't anything to worry about when, the morning following Mom's death, uncontrollable weeping necessitated my pulling the car over on the way to the grocery store.)

The myth that has accompanied me through this year of mourning is that of Orpheus and his beloved Eurydice. Just before their wedding, Eurydice is attacked by a satyr. In the struggle she falls into a nest of vipers and is fatally bitten in the heel. It is Orpheus who discovers her body. An exquisite musician, Orpheus pours out his bottomless grief in beautiful songs of lamentation. He decides to go to the Underworld in hopes of seeing Eurydice again. His mournful music softens Hades' and Persephone's hearts. They tell him that he and Eurydice can return to the realm of the living and live there together forevermore.

There's just one condition: as they walk toward the gates between the Underworld and our world, Eurydice must walk behind Orpheus. He must not turn back to look at her. If he does, the deal is off. For whatever reason, Orpheus does turn, looks at her, and loses her for a second, final time.

How often during this past year have I, like Orpheus, wanted my loved one back! I just want to see Mom once more—that twinkle in her eye, that smile that tells me all is well in the world. If I knew how to get to the Underworld to fetch her, I just might try!

Sometimes I want her back at predictable moments—like when I call home and, after talking with my dad a bit, feel like it's time for him to hand the phone over to Mom. I wished she were with us when our beloved Detroit Tigers nearly made it to the World Series. I know I'm going to want her back with us soon when my nephew—her first grandchild—gets married.

But sometimes the desire to have Mom back with me bursts into my mind for no particular reason. I'm doing laundry or driving through town or watching the Packers and I wish she were here. I suppose laundry makes sense because she was a laundry-holic. But the Packers? Baseball was her game, not football.

If I'm honest, I have to admit that there have even been times when I've thought that my mom's story could have a different ending. Maybe we could flash back and find something we missed that would have kept her alive. Maybe we could go back further to that fall on the stone steps of her church that triggered her downward slide. Maybe we could find a way to prevent the fall from happening. "Don't go to church today, Mom!" Or maybe I could take a stroll into the Underworld, make a deal with the gods, and fetch her back.

Last summer, I loved and hated reading Joan Didion's book about the death of her husband, *The Year of Magical Thinking*. She writes, "There was a level on which I believed that what had happened remained reversible." The story's ending could somehow be magically rewritten. Of course this doesn't make any sense, but I understand it now after walking through the netherworld of grief. Grief makes us think such magical, absurd thoughts, and it makes them seem not the least bit outlandish. Grief is a time of magical thinking.

There's another way that Eurydice's and Orpheus' story speaks to me. Meghan O'Rourke, in a *New Yorker* piece entitled "Story's End," writes:

> *The story of Orpheus, it occurs to me, is not just about the desire of the living to resuscitate the dead but about the ways in which the dead drag us along into their shadowy realm because we cannot let them go. So we follow them into the Underworld, descending, descending, until one day we turn and make our way back.*

That's it! This past year I feel like I have walked in the realm of the dead. I followed my mom there. I couldn't let her go. And it's certainly true that this past year I was so much more viscerally aware of death than before.

Grief pierced the veil of denial that had kept me from thinking much about the loss of loved ones or my own death.

I've learned some things this year walking through the valley of the shadow of death. I learned how much it mattered to create time and space to absorb the physical reality of death. For instance, when was the last time you visited a friend's house and they showed you into their parlor? The only parlors these days are in historic houses and, you guessed it, in funeral homes. The problem with parlors is they became associated with death more than anything else. And we've tried to banish death as much as possible. So we banished the parlor. Even in some funeral homes the traditional parlor is going the way of the home parlor. I know of one local funeral home that's gotten rid of the stuffy old furniture of the parlor and has instead created a space which feels more like your comfy family room or a coffee shop. Among Unitarian Universalists, once the freshly deceased person is carted away, that's usually the last we see of the body. This is a pretty different story from having a dead loved one laid out for a day or two in our family parlor!

Here's the problem with banishing the dead from our proximity: it sabotages the grief process. I now understand from first-hand experience that dealing directly and intimately with the dead is not an easy thing. My mom died very early on a Saturday morning. One of my brothers wasn't able to get there before she died. He felt that it was important to see my mother's body before she was cremated, but the funeral home wasn't open again until Monday.

I offered to accompany him to see the body, an offer he accepted. My mom didn't wish to be embalmed, so when my brother was finally able to see her on Monday, she looked like she had been dead a few days. It's not a favorite moment of mine. And yet, I swear it was a valuable part of my grief journey, especially since she didn't want a viewing at the memorial service. The fact of her death was pretty hard to deny as I stood by her body that Monday.

Another thing I learned is something I knew in my head but not enough in my gut: I need community. I need family and friends and congregation. Community is my lifeblood. My wife's and kids' loving support; friends driving seven hours for my mom's memorial service; a congregant sending me an email welcoming me to the club of those who have lost their mothers—— these things all mattered immensely. Even though at some level it was a solitary journey, I did not feel alone in that trek into the Underworld.

Loss teaches us not to take for granted the sweet things in life.

I also learned that as a grieving person I was prone to being tired, distracted and disoriented. I felt like my energy level was chronically lower than usual. All of this makes sense: it's exhausting to trudge through the Underworld. It takes an enormous amount of energy. I'm sure Orpheus felt exhausted, too. And of course walking in two worlds at the same time can be extremely disorienting. Life goes on and I had to work and shovel the snow and pay the taxes and show love to my wife and kids. I couldn't take a timeout from this world so I could concentrate on the Underworld.

I learned that self-pity is a pretty easy thing to fall into when you're walking through grief. It goes with the territory, I think. Joan Didion notes, "When we mourn our losses we also mourn, for better or for worse, ourselves. As we were. As we are no longer. As we will one day not be at all." Suddenly I can imagine my own son and daughter lowering my ashes into the earth. That definitely makes me feel sorry for myself.

And finally, I have learned to treasure more deeply life's sweetness. Loss teaches us not to take for granted the sweet things in life. We learn in our hearts and not just our heads that nothing lasts forever. Every day a loved one graces our lives is a blessing.

I fear losing touch with this lesson again—as seems inevitable when the grief becomes less intense, less frequent. We forget what we learned. But, for better or for worse, there does come a day when we stop following our loved one in the Underworld. There comes a day when we turn back and rejoin the world of the living. Even then, the remnants of grief can pull us back into the Underworld, but only briefly. The trajectory of our lives is back on top of the earth, not in the realm of the dead below.

Maybe it's not a particular moment in time when we turn and make our way back to this realm. Maybe it's a gradually dawning awareness that we're back. Whatever the case, I suspect that we don't really know when this moment or season happens, except in hindsight.

Looking back on this year of grief, a particular dream I had was a milestone for me. It was a marker that my time of following my dead mom in the Underworld was coming to an end. In the dream, I was communicating with my mom. She was dead but, as in the magical world of Harry Potter, she was alive in a portrait. Looking at me from the portrait she, like Harry's deceased mom and dad, could interact with me. She couldn't talk, so she had to use sign language. And though my mom never knew sign language as far as I know, she signed to me, "I love you."

That, it turns out, is all I needed to know. I could let her go. I could go and make my way back to the gates leading back to this life, this time, this place. ■

Working Through Environmental Despair (Excerpt)

BY **JOANNA MACY**, ECO-PHILOSOPHER

In August, 1978 I chaired a week-long seminar on planetary survival issues. College professors and administrators had prepared papers to deliver on themes ranging from the water crisis to environmental effects of nuclear technology. As we convened, I took time to acknowledge that the topic we were addressing was different from any other, that it touched each of us in a profoundly personal way. I suggested that we introduce ourselves by sharing an incident or image of how it had touched us.

The brief introductions that followed were potent, as those present dropped their professional manner and spoke simply and poignantly of what they saw and felt happening to their world: of their children, of their fears and discouragement. That brief sharing transformed the seminar. It changed the way we related to each other and to the material, and it unleashed energy and mutual caring. Late one night as we talked, a name for that magic emerged: "despair work."

Just as grief work is a process by which bereaved persons unblock their numbed energies by acknowledging and grieving the loss of a loved one, so do we all need to unblock our feelings about our threatened planet and the possible demise of our species. Until we do, our power of creative response will be crippled.

In striking upon "despair work," we were not being rhetorical; we were groping for an explanation of what had just happened. We knew that it had to do with a willingness to acknowledge and experience pain, and that this pain for our world, like pain for the loss of a loved one, is a measure of caring.

We also knew that the joint journey into the dark had changed us, bonding us in a special way, relieving us of pretense and competition. This occasion led to the further development of despair work in groups, and to the spread in many countries of what we originally called "despair and empowerment workshops."

The thousands of people with whom I have worked in church basements, community centers, and classrooms have revealed to me, in ways I had not foreseen, the power, size, and beauty of the human heart. They have demonstrated that pain for our world touches each of us, and that this pain is rooted in caring. They have demonstrated that our apparent public apathy is but a fear of experiencing and expressing this pain, and that once it is acknowledged and shared, it opens the way to our power.

As I meditated on the lessons I learned from these workshops, and on the connections between pain and power, five principles emerged to illumine the nature of despair work and encapsulate its assumptions.

Feelings of pain for our world are natural and healthy.

Confronted with widespread suffering and threats of global disaster, responses of anguish—of fear, anger, grief, and even guilt—are normal. They are a measure of our humanity. And these feelings are probably what we have most in common. Just by virtue of sharing this planet at this time, we know these feelings more than our own grandparents or any earlier generation could have known them. We are in grief together.

Pain is morbid only if denied.

It is when we disown our pain for the world that it becomes dysfunctional. We know now what it costs us to repress it, how that cost is measured in numbness and in feelings of isolation and impotence. It is measured as well in the hatreds and suspicions that divide us. Repressed despair seeks scapegoats and turns, in anger, against other members of society. It also turns inward in depression and self-destruction, through drug abuse and suicide. Our refusal to acknowledge and feel despair keeps it in place.

Information alone is not enough.

To deal with the distress we feel for our world, we need more than additional data about its plight. Terrifying information can drive us deeper into denial and feelings of futility, unless we can deal with the responses it arouses in us. We need to process this information on the psychological and emotional level in order to fully respond on the cognitive level. We already know we are in danger. The essential question is: can we free ourselves to respond?

Unblocking repressed feelings releases energy and clears the mind.

This is known as catharsis. Repression is physically, mentally, and emotionally expensive; it drains the body, dulls the mind, and muffles emotional responses. When repressed material is brought to the surface and released, energy is released as well; life comes into clearer focus. Art, ritual, and play have always played a cathartic role in our history—just as, in our time, psychotherapy does.

Unblocking our pain for the world reconnects us with the larger web of life.

As we let ourselves experience and move through this pain, we move through to its source. By recognizing our capacity to suffer with our world, we dawn to wider dimensions of being. In those dimensions there is still pain, but also a lot more. There is wonder, even joy, as we come home to our mutual belonging—and there is a new kind of power.

Excerpted from a piece which appeared in Ecopsychology, *edited by Roszak, Gomes and Kanner, published by the Sierra Club in 1995.* ■

From Your Minister

BY **MEG RILEY**
SENIOR MINISTER,
CHURCH OF THE
LARGER FELLOWSHIP

It was not a surprise when my mother died. Survival rates for ovarian cancer are not high, and hers was in stage four by the time it was diagnosed. Against those odds, she lived three years with a high quality of life. Finally, when the experimental treatments could not stave it off any longer, she refused any more chemo and radiation, quit eating, and slowly let go.

After she died, I developed a condition known as "TMJ"—short for Temporomandibular joint disorder. What this meant is that my jaw was in intense pain that painkillers couldn't touch. For some reason, gnawing on little pieces of cardboard that I placed in my mouth like a dentist doing x-rays helped the pain. My primary memory of this time is sitting in my then-office, with a box of outdated business cards by my phone, emptying slowly as I chewed them up one by one.

Finally, I realized that the one thing that stopped the excruciating pain was crying. After that, I didn't get out of bed in the morning until I had, literally, driven myself to tears. Regular crying kept the pain at bay. Many days, I did not want to cry. I wanted to get up and function. It was only the threat of severe pain that made me linger on sad memories, that convinced me that crying was a priority. I kept photos of my mother nearby to help prompt the tears.

I still look back at this time and thank my body for its sheer genius in demanding that I take time to grieve, to mourn. My body would not let me say the things that my rational mind wanted to say: "Yes, it's sad, but it was a long time coming…. Not such a big deal because I was already prepared for it…. She had three good years…. She would not want me to cry." My body just said, "Cry. Or else it will really hurt."

One religious people who, in my experience, really understand and honor the need for mourning rituals are the Jews. Having gone through some of the Jewish rituals and practices with friends who have lost loved ones, I have been deeply comforted by the traditions which make room for attention and special treatment for those who mourn. Jewish practices structure life for the bereaved as they move through stages of grief—special practices for the first week, the first month, the first year, and annually after that. I'm not Jewish, but I still find these rituals are deeply healing, deeply resonant with human experience. I can only imagine how comforting they would be for me if they also held the lived experiences of my ancestors.

> May your tears bring healing.

Not everyone can listen to and honor such wisdom—the wisdom of the grieving heart and body, the wisdom of giving time to mourning. We may live in an environment that does not support feelings of any kind, much less crying. We may be in such a traumatic situation that there is simply no room for grief. Because mourning, like everything else we do with consciousness and intention, takes time. Takes energy. Takes us saying no to other things so that we can attend to it. Not everyone can do this, whether because the situation you are mourning about is still tilting full throttle, because you're in prison, because you have young children who would never allow you to languish in bed weeping, or so many other situations.

In such cases, I've been aware that our grief will wait for us, will still be there to attend to when we are able to get to it. For instance, when marriage equality became legal in Minnesota, I was astonished to find not only euphoria and relief wash over me, but also tremendous grief. Suddenly, ghosts of all the beloved GLBT people I had lost, particularly during the early days of the AIDS epidemic, were right there with me. In order to mourn, I found myself seeking out other survivors from that time—those of us who had wept over, prayed over, buried way too many loved ones to fully grieve them all. Names I hadn't thought of in decades came to my lips; faces rose before my eyes. My old comrades and I needed to mourn together, to name names and to send mental postcards to those we had lost, saying "Wish you were here." Pain that I had not even realized I carried with me was released.

Absent traditions that hold us together as a people in the way that the Jews and other religious peoples mourn, Unitarian Universalists shape rituals ourselves which hold us, which support us in body and spirit. During the month of October, CLF will be offering opportunities for structured mourning with others. Please check out our website (www.QuestforMeaning.org) for updates on these opportunities. Please consider honoring yourself by participating.

For all who are now mourning, may the depth of your grief be a measure of your love for those you have lost. May you feel the accompaniment of this community—people you may have never met, but who nonetheless care about you. May our company help you to find moments of peace, freedom, and comfort even in your pain. And may your tears bring healing.■

Grieving hearts often find solace through our CLF ministries in the wee morning hours when the world seems unreachable. Please give $100 to help us continue to offer comfort and community whenever and wherever there is need. You can give at **clfuu.org** or by calling 1-800-231-3027.

REsources for Living

BY **LYNN UNGAR**, MINISTER FOR LIFESPAN LEARNING, CHURCH OF THE LARGER FELLOWSHIP

One way of defining religion might be as a place for talking about things that are hard to talk about. *What does my life mean? Who or what is in charge? Where did everything come from? What do I owe to other people? What is good enough? How am I connected to the other beings of the planet as well as the other people? Why do bad things happen?*

None of these questions is easy to talk about, because none of them have a single right answer that you can learn and have ready for all time. But one of the hardest things to talk about is *What happens when we die*? For starters, the answer is that we don't know. Maybe our matter and our energy (which are really the same thing) merge back into the universe without leaving anything personal behind. Maybe we have spirits that are reincarnated for another go-round at life, or that meet up with the spirits of loved ones who have died, or move on to another universe.

> What do we do, what do we say, especially to children, when someone we love is dying or has died?

We really have no way of knowing. So maybe it's just best to put your faith in the version you prefer, since a) there's nothing wrong with taking comfort where you find it, and b) who's to say that what happens after we die isn't decided by what we believed while we were alive?

It's hard to talk about what might happen when we die (the hardest part being that dying is a matter of when, not if). But it can be harder still to talk about what happens when people who we love die. After all, by the time we face our own death, there really won't be much we can do about it. But the sad fact is that at some point people and animals we deeply care about will almost certainly die, and we have to figure out how to respond. And that is hard and painful for anyone—and especially hard and painful if you're a child, or if you're a parent who has to try to explain things to a child.

Some religions hand out answers that are designed to help ease the pain: *He's gone to be with Jesus…. She's in a better place…. God called him home….* And you can certainly be Unitarian Universalist and believe in those answers. But our religion is not going to give them to you as something that we're sure of. So what do we do, what do we say, especially to children, when someone we love is dying or has died? I don't, of course, have all the answers. But I have some suggestions.

- **Remembering may hurt, but it also helps.** When someone we love dies, what we get to keep, in addition to the love, are our memories. And those memories stay brighter and fresher in our mind when we tell the stories. Then other people can have those treasured memories, too. When I found out a couple of years ago that my beloved dog Coretta was dying of cancer, I decided that every day she had left I was going to share one good thing about her on Facebook. I called it 100 Good Things About Coretta, although I only got to 29 before she died. I still go back and read those memory postings, and yes, I still cry, but that isn't a bad thing. Tell the stories. Even tell the stories that aren't so good.
- **It isn't always going to hurt this way.** Losing someone hurts differently at different times, and that's OK. You might feel like laughing and playing a day or two after someone has died, or you may break down sobbing years later. There is nothing wrong with either. But generally, the pain of losing someone is like the half-life of radioactive material. After a certain period of time it's half as bad as it was. And then it becomes half of that. And so on. The pain never completely goes away, but you should trust that with time it will feel better.
- **Rituals are there for a reason.** Different religions have different ways of handling death, but none suggests that you should just shrug your shoulders and get on with life. You might want to have a memorial service for a beloved pet, or keep a lit candle by the picture of a departed grandmother or have a picnic on the grave of an ancestor or wear black clothes to show you're in mourning or create an altar with a few of someone's favorite belongings or chose any number of other things that help you to give shape in the visible world to the feelings that you have inside.
- **Love doesn't die.** Love is like a candle that lights the flame of another candle. And that candle goes on to light a bunch more flames that go on to light still more. So even if the first candle goes out, the flame is still going. When someone we love dies, we keep the love. And our job is to keep handing on that love, lighting more flames that will keep carrying on.

It isn't easy to talk about death, and it's even harder to handle the death of someone you love. But talking helps. Sharing the love helps. Remembering helps. Taking time to grieve helps. Rituals of mourning help. And just being open with people of all ages to the reality that life and death, joy and sorrow, are all tied up together in this world of ours can help us to hold one another up in times of grief and mourning. ■

Church of the Larger Fellowship
Unitarian Universalist
24 Farnsworth Street
Boston, Massachusetts 02210-1409 USA

NONPROFIT ORG.
U.S. POSTAGE
PAID
BOSTON, MA
PERMIT NO. 55362

Did You Know
That you can memorialize a loved one by making a gift to the CLF in their memory? Contact Lena Gardner, CLF Membership and Fundraising Director, lgardner@clfuu.org

Web Site www.clfuu.org — E-mail clf@clfuu.org — Toll-Free Line 800-231-3027 — Jewelry 617-948-6150
CLF Unitarian Universalist, 24 Farnsworth Street, Boston MA 02210-1409 USA — Telephone 617-948-6166

Offering for Grief

by Nancy Shaffer

Look! I have made this bowl
for you, this large dark blue one
with lilies etched across the bottom,
around the sides.

I have cleaned this box for you,
lined it in soft brown wool.
Have set it here by the stove,
warm.

You could lie under the mulberry tree
at the edge of the garden,
wait in the grass for lacewings and evening.
or lie on the bed, light falling near.
Sit on the bureau.

What I mean to say is:
I will make a place for you. ■

From Rev. Nancy Shaffer's meditation manual Instructions in Joy, *published in 2002 by Skinner House. Also available from the UUA bookstore (www.uua.org/bookstore) is Nancy's recently published posthumous book* While Still There is Light: Writings from a Minister Facing Death.