



Quest

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Grief is just love
with no place to go.

• Jamie Anderson •

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Letting Go

BY MEGAN FOLEY, REGIONAL LEAD, CENTRAL EAST REGION, UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST ASSOCIATION

When you're a capable, confident, 28-year-old child of privilege and experience, then you are accustomed to taking the challenges that come up in life and simply...managing them.

By the time I was 28 I had lived in three countries by my own initiative, and several others by tagging along with my parents. I had been married for six years and was a mother for two, and had gotten a BA in psychology and a master's degree in sociology. My husband, Stefan, who was 29, was a chief financial officer for a division in his insurance corporation. As a result of his job, we moved from Rio de Janeiro, Brazil to Minneapolis, with all the attendant tasks and responsibilities an international move entails. In addition to those events, I was seven months pregnant with my second son at this time, so I was also busy finding myself somewhere to have a baby in a strange city. So as you can imagine, at this time Stefan and I had a major to-do list, but nothing that two people with skills and resources wouldn't be able to manage.

And I swear to you, although it may seem ridiculous, that when Stefan was diagnosed with a brain tumor right in the middle of all this, in some very practical ways taking care of his illness became simply more items added to the list of to-dos. Granted, these to-dos were scarier, and the stakes were higher. But we used the same system, you see, to manage the illness that we had always used to manage our lives together.

Gather resources. Get educated. Make decisions. Take charge. Do the right thing, so you'll get the right outcome. Assume that everything will work out fine.

This methodology was our foundation, our grounding. We had the energy and efficiency needed to tackle a ridiculous list of to-dos. And when Stefan's energy flagged with his disease and the treatment, I took over everything. The list never came to an end, but I didn't notice because I knew my job was to be in charge. Not only did the list not come to an end, but it increased exponentially as we went along.

We did extensive research and decided on a course of treatment. Brain surgery led to unexpected paralysis on Stefan's right side, which necessitated its own course of research and treatment. I had my baby, Jake, and continued to care for my two sons on my own. I got settled into our community and new house, availed myself of at-home-mom resources, and found preschools.

I managed Stefan's care, including his radiation and fifteen months of inpatient chemotherapy, which involved a surgical procedure every five weeks. Blood tests every week. Periodic setbacks with low blood counts. Doing the dance of making sure the medication balances were correct. Periodic seizures when they weren't. All this in a town, a state, with no family, and no friends except for some brand new ones, no church, just us.

Any normal person, especially one involved in ministering to others, can tell you that this all is just too much for the 20-years-ago me to be in charge of, to be expected to manage. But I was not normal in that time period, and I was not involved in ministry, and this is what I thought the world was like: You were in charge of the success and failure of your own life. Problems were unfortunate, and they called for extra competency, and so you rose to the occasion. This is what life is, decided the 10-years-ago me. I am in charge, and the degree to which I can't meet the challenge is the degree to which I fail, and let my family down. That was inconceivable. So, simple enough—meet the challenge. Always.

After the first six months in Minnesota, things sort of leveled out for me and my family. After a year and a half, Stefan completed his course of chemo treatment, and was declared cancer-free. He was weak from the treatment, skinny and bald, and still used a cane. We were told that this sort of cancer does tend to come back; but really, that was an issue for another day. For now, the to-do list was complete. Time for the next one.

We began to plan our return to “normal” life, still thinking such a thing was possible. In our rush to get through this whole event as efficiently as we could, we hadn’t noticed the ways in which we had already fundamentally changed—and not for the better.

We hadn’t noticed that although Stefan and I were still quite a team when it came to his treatment, in other areas of our relationship things had started to slide. We hadn’t noticed, or at least I hadn’t, that I was wound tighter than a drum, and was nearing the end of my capacity to ignore my own needs in order to deal with babies and health concerns.

And we certainly hadn’t noticed, or at least I hadn’t, that we actually already knew that our belief that we could manage and fix anything was wrong. After all the major drama, we weren’t giving ourselves the space to see that we had been in the wilderness this whole time, a new place entirely. We were still in the desert, and being in the wilderness called for a new perspective, a new game plan. We were like people in the middle of the Sahara with nothing but a bottle of sunscreen, telling ourselves we were having a beach vacation. Or at least that the rescue chopper would be there very shortly.

Things did not stay calm. Stefan fell and broke his hip in December of 2001. While waiting for surgery, he fell into a coma, and no-one was sure exactly why. I pulled out my best medical management expertise, talking to doctors and organizing treatment, figuring out the best course of action.

And herein lies that moment when it all changed, and I saw that I was in the wilderness, had been in the wilderness, lost in the desert for real, and it was time for something new.

I was on the phone with some doctor or another, and they were reporting in. No change in consciousness. A shadow on the MRI—was the tumor returning? Probably not. Why the coma? Sometimes the brain shuts down for a while—that’s a good thing. He could pop out of it just fine. We’ll monitor this. We’ll take a look at that. Oh, and by the way, Stefan has osteoporosis, likely caused by the steroids he’s been taking for years to help with the seizures. That’s why his hip broke when he fell. And on to this. And on to that.

There was something about that osteoporosis part. I remember how I was standing—I was on the phone in the front room of my house with my head bowed, one foot up on the sofa. But inside of me, my body did something else entirely. Inside, inside my spirit, when I heard about the osteoporosis, the one last straw, I opened out my hands.

I let go.

This is too much for me. This may turn out fine or it may turn out terribly, but You’re in charge. Who I might have been talking to, I did not know, but it didn’t matter. It is Yours now, Hand of Fate or whatever is out there. You take it.

Faith is like a mustard seed, Jesus said. It’s just a speck, the smallest of all the seeds on earth, and yet it grows a shrub so large that birds can make nests in its shade (Mark 4:31-32). My experience on the phone was the mustard seed of my life.

It could have been just a temporary thing, a brief respite from a path that didn’t change at all from the one I had been on. But as it turned out, it was not a temporary thing at all. That seed of letting go became the foundation of everything I then did, the foundation by which I experienced all that was to come: Stefan’s death and the choices I

made, first in coming to DC, and then in getting re-involved with Unitarian Universalism, and getting remarried, and then in choosing to go to seminary, and all the rest. It's the foundation I use now, and I don't think I could be without it if I tried.

I open my hands. It's Your show, not mine. I turn it over. You're in charge. Show me what's next, and that's what I will do.

The Tao Te Ching says that trying to control the future is like trying to take the master carpenter's place. When you handle the master carpenter's tools, Lao Tzu tells us, when you handle the tools, chances are that you'll cut your hand. Hands off the tools. They aren't yours.

I couldn't know at the time the blessings and miracles that would grow out of this moment of transformation. I just let go, and walked off into a different kind of wilderness, one where, like Jesus in the desert, I was waited on by angels. I hope, when it comes to your wilderness, that you have seen them waiting on you, too. ■

One of the many ways to carve meaning out of grief is to honor the memory of those we have lost. We welcome gifts to sustain the work of the CLF made in honor of those who are gone from this earth, but remain in memory. To arrange a memorial gift, please call the CLF office at (617) 948-6150.

Grief and Gravity

BY AMY ZUCKER MORGENSTERN, PARISH MINISTER, UU CHURCH OF PALO ALTO, CALIFORNIA

The movie *Gravity*, which came out in 2013, is about grief. And it's worth watching with this in mind, because what Alfonso Cuarón, the director and co-writer, and Jonás Cuarón, the other co-writer, have to tell us about grief can help us through it.

When we first see Dr. Ryan Stone, she is floating in space. She doesn't seem to belong there. She's fighting nausea, and she's not an astronaut or engineer by training—she's a medical doctor. But she has a reason to have signed up for this space-station repair job. Her young daughter died from a fall in a playground, and ever since then, Ryan has tried not to touch the ground.

Gravity has not been good to Ryan. You can see why she wants to leave it behind. Of all the things that could kill a person, drowning or poisoning or a car crash, the writers chose a different fate for her child: she fell. She died from gravity. That moment of gravity inflicted upon Ryan one of the weightiest losses a person can endure.

And then there's the very word *gravity*, so similar to *grave*.... Gravity, grave, and grief all come from the same root, the Old English for *dig*. Earth holds us, which is all very well when we are happy. But when grief comes, we may want to float above everything. It is so, so hard just to be awake, to be aware, to continually encounter the solid reality of a world that reverberates with absence, because the one we love is nowhere to be found. There is no escaping our feelings, we know that, but if we could just float, maybe we could float away and never feel anything again....

Ryan gets her chance, because the mission goes wrong, and suddenly it is very likely that she is going to die up there, that very day, in space. Alone and unmoored, she is tempted to just give in and give up.

But by the close of the movie, she wants to live. And in its final moments, she digs her hands into the earth, grateful

just to be here, and when she stands up on those shaky legs, the camera looks up at her as if at a colossus. With that shot, Cuarón is telling us that Ryan Stone is heroic, and she is. She hasn't saved the world from invasion or her city from destruction. She has simply done what each of us must do at some point, when even to be on earth, of earth, is excruciatingly painful. She chooses life, the whole weight and heft of it.

When sorrow comes for us, we may want to just float. And that can be good medicine. Music, sleep, the shadow worlds of movies or books, might give us some relief for awhile. In the end, though, we are creatures of earth, and we need gravity. We must remain tethered to reality and all the pain it brings, or else float forever in a half-existence. As the introduction to the movie says, as the camera pans an unimaginably large, indifferent expanse, "life in space is impossible."

When we realize that we cannot float forever and we find it unendurable to touch the ground, friends can be the bridge we need. The touch of a hand, the sound of a voice, good food made by good friends, tether us gently: not demanding that we return to gravity's relentless pull until we're ready, but letting us know that we are of this life, this earth. Creating something together, whether a cantata or a conversation, offers threads of connection when we still feel as if a stronger one would hurt too much. When others express their griefs and losses, never as a comparison or competition, but humbly, out of their own need, they anchor us to the life we share. And bit by bit, we may follow that lifeline back to healing and joy. ■

No Words Needed

BY BY JASON, CLF MEMBER INCARCERATED IN FLORIDA

When you lose someone you love, there are some things that are just really hard to hear: *They're in a better place. Time heals all wounds. I know how you feel.* These are probably the three least helpful things for someone who is grieving to hear.

Maybe they *are* in a better place, but it doesn't make me miss them any less. Maybe time *will* heal the pain of their loss, but right now it still hurts. And maybe you *have* felt the pain of losing another, but if you really knew how I felt, you would *not* say any of those things to me right now.

That's how I felt when I lost my mother 21 years ago, when I lost my father six years ago, and when I lost my best friend four years ago. And I imagine that's how I'll feel each and every time a loved one dies. But there's nothing wrong with that.

People deal with grief in different ways. Some get angry, some get sad, and some pretend that everything is all right. None of those things are the "right way," and none are the "wrong way." It's just the way we deal.

I can't offer those grieving any great advice on how to get past the grief. And, honestly, most of them don't want to hear it anyway. But for those who know someone who is grieving, I do have some great advice: They don't want to hear it.

What they do want is someone they can cry with, someone whose steady presence will help them move past the anger, sorrow, pain and loss. You don't need words for that. You don't really need to *do* anything. Just be there. No words needed. ■

Pay Attention

BY DANIELLE DI BONA, MEMBER OF THE CLF BOARD

“Sit, Naomi, and pay attention!” This was my ongoing, never-ending command to my Soft Coated Wheaten Terrier. Naomi Jean was a very well behaved dog. In fact, she had passed all her obedience tests and was a certified Therapy Dog. Whatever commands I gave, she followed immediately, but I was never sure she was giving me her full attention.

Over the almost 25 years as a hospice and palliative care chaplain I have been blessed by my beloved patients with a profound lesson. It is that this beautiful world is laid out before us for our pleasure and joy. And, also for our despair and anguish. Whatever our frame of mind, the one thing we can always do is to stop and pay attention. Pay attention to the details of life, the small momentary miracles that propel us through our days.

I have a Unitarian Universalist theology of hope. And it is based on my belief that being present in this very moment is the way to peace. What I know for sure is that we are only promised the moment we are in, and that is enough. It is enough if we fully embrace it without distraction.

We as Unitarian Universalists are a product of a theology of hope. Our Universalist ancestors shared their hopeful theology when they preached that all people were loved by God and would never be abandoned by God. In the mid-20th century Unitarian Universalists defied segregation laws and accompanied our Black siblings on the road to voting rights in the setting of deep and deadly racism. A theology of hope in a situation that seemed unredeemable. And Unitarian Universalists all over this country marched and rolled and changed the law to make it legal for all people to marry the person they loved. And today, exhibiting a deep theology of hope, Unitarian Universalists around the nation are defying calls to “other” people who are different from us, are showing up to protest the murders by police of unarmed Black women and men, and who are taking the risk of being dragged off the streets by paramilitary police for protesting the sins of our government.

A theology of hope. How can we not be active and present in the world while we seek justice? Even in grief and pain. Even in despair. We have the opportunity to be in communion with each other and with the wider world to do the work of our faith. This theology of hope reminds me that I do not move alone in this world. We not only do not move alone, we move in the loving embrace of our religious community. That religious community of hope.

How can we not, in the middle of the 21st century, be lifted up and buoyed by these stories of our faith’s theology of hope?

My friends, living and believing in a theology of hope cannot be sustained without a deep faithfulness...without a faith journey and spiritual practice. Just ask Naomi.

As I stood in front of her in training class after training class, I would become more frustrated by the minute as Naomi looked around the room while I was frantically touching my nose and saying: “Naomi, pay attention.” She would sit, stay, heel, and do all the other commands, but never truly watching me. And then, one day it occurred to me. She *was* paying attention! Just not to me. She was taking in all the sights and sounds and smells around her, while continuing to do her job. She was paying attention to the most important things around her. Those things that are short lived but soul filling. Those things that brought her joy. She had a spiritual practice!

But, did I? Not so much. One day, as I was hustling off to my job as a hospital chaplain, driving down the road, I realized that I could not remember seeing my beautiful herb garden that morning. I was so shocked that I returned home to spend a minute in the beauty. I was devastated. My theology of hope is not sustainable on its own. It must be supported by a spiritual practice of paying attention to the beauty of the moment that the universe has given us. When we grasp onto our current experience of beauty and joy, and live it, feel it, celebrate it fully, we can survive the news of the day, the newest tragedy of the week, the outrage of the month.

In *The Miracle of Mindfulness* Thich Naht Hanh tells of watching a friend eat a tangerine. He says that his friend, Jim, began to talk about what they would be doing in the future. As he talked, he popped a piece of tangerine into his mouth, and before he had even begun to chew it, he had another piece ready to eat. Thich Nhat Hanh says it was as if he hadn't been eating the tangerine at all. If anything, says Thich Nhat Hanh, he was "eating his future plans." I am struck by how easy it is to be wrapped up in what has to be done next, in thoughts of being late for an appointment, in list making in my mind—all to the exclusion of what is going on right around me.

After that day in the garden I went back to my Native roots for a practice of mindfulness, a practice of paying attention. I remembered an old Indian ritual in which, when one rises in the morning, they go outside, face the east and offer gratitude. So simple, yet so profound. Now in the morning I too, along with many other Native people, go outside, look to the east and offer my gratitude. From there it is so easy to pay attention to the small and beautiful gifts of the day, which sustain me.

If you join me in a spiritual practice of your own, and a Unitarian Universalist theology of hope, you will, I am sure, find a deep and abiding peace. But that's not all. You will also find a powerful strength and faith that will sustain you through grief and help you to make meaningful change in your corner of the world. I tell you this to remind you that, in this time of fear, worry, anxiety we have the opportunity to find grace and hope.

And so, as I would say to Naomi Jean, as I grasped her furry cheeks in my hands...PAY ATTENTION! And, obedient dog that she was, she did. Only not to me. To the world. To the present. To life's gift of hope, joy, and the contentment that comes from truly knowing the place she was in. ■

REsources for Living

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

We tend to talk about grief as the feeling that arises when someone we love dies. And certainly that's a very real, potent cause of grief. But there are so many kinds of grief, small and large, that weave through our lives. As adults we tend to get good at tamping down our feelings of grief, reminding ourselves that they are "first world problems" or that others have it far worse than we do. Which may be true, but it could also be true that whatever our feelings, small or large, they are *our* feelings, worthy of recognition.

Children are certainly not born with any such qualms. Toddlers are notorious for screaming, melt-down tantrums over things that make no sense at all from an adult perspective. I asked friends for examples and got a wide range: Water is wet. I cut his pancakes wrong. The movie is Hercules, not Percules. The hot cocoa is hot—she wanted cold hot cocoa. If you're a parent, you probably have any number of examples of your own. It turns out that the number of things that are a crisis when you are very young contains a

massive variety of things.

And, yes, it's incredibly annoying when you're the parent dealing with a screaming fit over something that makes no sense. (I listened to a podcast in which a researcher recorded the enraged, agonized screams of a little girl who wanted to sit at the head of the table, but the table was round.) But we experience grief any time the world fails to meet our expectation of how things should be, and small children have not yet learned what reasonable expectations are for much of how the world works.

Of course, the same could be said of adults. We know, intellectually, that everyone dies—and not always when they are old. But that doesn't stop us from feelings of rage as well as sadness when someone we love is taken from us too soon. We know that a significant percentage of relationships end in break-up, but that doesn't change how we feel if a partner leaves or betrays us. We know that bodies are fragile, prone to illness and accident and aging, but when it is our own body that loses function, it's only natural to grieve over abilities that we have lost.

Buddhism addresses this reality of human existence by teaching how to give up attachment—how to accept that change and loss is simply a part of life. All of us will experience pain and loss, but we can learn not to compound that pain and loss by trying to hold on to what is not permanent. Other religions have their own ways of addressing our grief and rage that things don't turn out the way we wanted or expected: a promise that earthly sorrow is insignificant compared to the prospect of heavenly joy, the idea that suffering offers redemption, the idea that our own suffering connects us with the suffering of Christ on the cross.

Certainly there is no one UU theology of suffering, or answer to how to make religious sense from our grief. But we do affirm our human identity as story tellers and meaning makers. Suffering and grief happen in the inevitable way of life, without there necessarily being any kind of divine message involved.

But we have a unique ability as human beings to create meaning out of our grief. Parents of children killed in school shootings band together to promote gun control. Family members of a person who died young of a rare disease raise money for research for a cure. Rather than seeking revenge for the murder of a beloved family member, people turn instead toward restorative justice, toward having their grief heard and responded to in a way that feels meaningful and healing.

Of course, not all the stories we tell are so constructive. Grief can easily spiral into self-blame: If only I had followed through with my plan to call him that night, then he wouldn't have taken his own life. If only I had driven a different route, then the accident never would have happened. If only I had looked different or weren't so loud or so quiet or so difficult or so accommodating, then they would have loved me the way I hoped they would.

These stories of regret and self-accusation can leave us trapped in a spiral that piles self-loathing on top of loss. Grief is sharp and real and inevitable, but we can choose the stories that we tell about that grief, opting for stories of resilience and gratitude and possibility and the ongoing presence of love.

When we feel aggrieved because we haven't gotten what we wanted, we can weave stories about learning and the creativity that comes from having to make a new way. While we grieve the vast suffering of injustice or the planetary crisis of climate change, we can tell stories of resistance, of the ways that we tried to build a better world.

None of our stories, our attempts to make meaning and sense of loss, will prevent suffering or free us from the pain

of grief. But our stories can keep us stuck, raging that water is wet or cocoa is hot, or they can help us to move forward, carrying our grief with us toward some greater purpose. So much of what happens to us is beyond our choosing, painfully out of our control. But we have the choice to make meaning out of loss, to tell stories that comfort and heal and encourage growth as we embrace life. ■

Jeremiah 9:17-21

¹⁷ This is what the Lord Almighty says:

“Consider now! Call for the wailing women to come;
send for the most skillful of them.

¹⁸ Let them come quickly
and wail over us

till our eyes overflow with tears
and water streams from our eyelids.

¹⁹ The sound of wailing is heard from Zion:
‘How ruined we are!
How great is our shame!

We must leave our land

because our houses are in ruins.”

²⁰ Now, you women, hear the word of the Lord;
open your ears to the words of his mouth.

Teach your daughters how to wail;
teach one another a lament.

²¹ Death has climbed in through our windows
and has entered our fortresses;
it has removed the children from the streets
and the young men from the public squares.

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