

What the Living Do

*A Sermon by Rev. Heather Concannon & Rev. Nathan Detering
November 4, 2018*

“Here is the world; beautiful and terrible things will happen.

Keep our hearts tender.

Keep our eyes soft.

Keep our words true.

Because this is what we are about:

We know there is no answer but to love one another.

We bear witness against unnecessary destruction.

We gather in community to practice being the person

We say we want to be.

We cannot do everything,

But we can do something, and that something is not nothing.

So forget your perfect offering.

There is a crack in everything

That is how the light gets in.”

Heather:

On All Souls Sunday this year

I am feeling especially tender

And connected to loved ones we have lost.

Because as many of you know, Rev. Nathan and I both have lost our dads in the past year-

My dad died in January, and Nathan’s in August.

And I know that loss and grief immeasurable

Has been a part of the lives of many people in this room, too

Whether this year or in years past.

Today Nathan and I chose to share the sermon

A series of questions

To reflect together on the experience of loss, of grief, of theological questions, of remembrance

Because we know that this is what the living do:

We wake up

We wash dishes

We go grocery shopping

We go to the doctors

We go to work

We care for children

We grieve

We cry

We remember

We ask the questions that we will never know the answers to

We wrestle with questions like the ones we will be reflecting on today.

Nathan will start us off in reflecting on our first question. Nathan, what makes it so hard to cope with death?

Nathan: *What makes it hard to cope with death?*

What makes it hard to cope with death?

Of course, me being me, I looked up etymology of ‘cope’ and I was surprised to learn that it comes from a 14th century French word

‘copen’ that means to ‘*come to blows or engage in conflict,*’
Only later coming to mean *handle or successfully deal with.*

And given this, what makes death hard to ‘cope’ with is

That...we can’t actually quarrel with it, can we?

Because it comes it has a way of finding all of us, no matter how much \$\$ we have, no matter how much kale we eat, no matter if we’re ready to go gently into that good night, Dylan Thomas said,

Or if we rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Maybe that’s why I love that ‘TNT’ song so much,

Because it says ‘no hard feelings’ and sings about acceptance

Rather than quarreling or coming to blows with the reality of our...

Mortality.

And yet. And yet.

It stings, death does. Because its arrival so very often feels so very unfair,

It coming in the night before we have said all we need to,

Before we have said goodbye,

Before we have lived enough,

Before we said sorry,

Before we have ‘I love you’

Before...we got done with our plans.

And here’s the other thing – even when we think we have grieved

And put away the cards and the flowers have died and we think we have

Moved on, death still surprises us...

Like two weeks ago, when a friend from my childhood texted me photos

Of his new fancy car...

And laying there on the couch, I clicked on that photo and went to forward

It to my dad, because he loved this friend and he loved cards...

And I can’t bring myself to delete my dad’s cell number from my phone...

Only realizing there, as I was about to hit ‘send’ that he isn’t there

To receive it....

So no hard feelings death, but you keep sneaking up sideways at me,

Reminding me of your presence when I thought I have, we have,

Moved on....

Heather, you turn: *What helps you cope with death? Where do you find comfort in grief?*

Heather: What helps you cope with death? Where do you find healing in grief?

In some ways these are two different questions.

For me, the first question, “what helps you cope with death” is a question of meaning, how do you find meaning in death. The second, “where do you find comfort in grief” is a question of practices.

In many ways, I cope with the fact of death by allowing it to compel me to seek meaning in life.

My experiences of being close to death have propelled me to look closely at my own life, and at the meaning I want my life to have, and to shape my life according to those aspirations I have for my life.

Sometimes, asking the big questions is helpful, and can help us to find healing, to move through the hardest parts of loss. And sometimes, all we need is that feeling of comfort- to deeply know and feel we are loved, to know that there is a love holding us and holding all that we love.

Where do I find healing in grief? I personally find healing in doing what the living do:

Writing.

Watching the West Wing on Netflix.

Going for walks, even when I don't want to.

Making art.

Eating meals, even when I don't have an appetite.

Singing.

Crying.

Reading about grief and knowing my experiences are normal.

Petting the cat.

Gardening.

Looking at pictures.

Listening to music my dad loved.

Talking to my mom and my sister and my partner.

Going to therapy.

Doing house projects, because they make me feel connected to my Dad.

Watching Madam Secretary on Netflix.

Napping.

Laughing.

Saying no to plans so I can have space to feel my feelings.

Saying yes to plans even if I don't totally want to do because social time will be good for me.

Sharing my feelings.

Distracting myself.

Spending time with the baby I live with.

Watching The Good Place on, you guessed it: Netflix.

Your list may be different. Of course, there is the age-old advice: exercise regularly, try to sleep enough, eat healthy. And these are all good things to try to do, but even more so, I have found that the most important thing is to be gentle with yourself—to try to lessen the

voice inside when it starts to tell you that you should be doing grief *better* somehow. Trust your intuition, reach out for help when you need it. Give yourself permission to grieve in whatever ways it is coming up for you. Know that there is no one right way to do it, but that the only way through it is to go through it.

Another way I find comfort in grief is in memory. Nathan: How do we invite the presence of loved ones into our lives after they have died? What are the practices of memory?

Nathan: *How do we invite the presence of loved ones into our lives after they have died? What are the practices?*

You have heard me say before, quoting Howard Teibel,
 Who were longtime members here before they moved to Colorado,
 And who lost their baby Drew in 2003,
 How hard it can be to grieve and in this ‘*get over it already*’
 And ‘*there are in a better place*’ culture,
 Not least because in contrast to so much of human history,
 Death for us now in our time, our context, is so medicalized,
 So hidden, so private when it used it be accepted as more natural and
 Ushered in more among the presence of family and friends.
 Which is why I am so grateful to the hospice movement, having
 Seen how hospice has offered you and now me such tenderness and care
 When our loved ones cross over that threshold from life to whatever is next (more on that
 in a bit).

All of this I mention because in a culture that doesn’t talk about death,
 It can be hard to know how to keep the memory of our loved ones alive.
 Which is sad because as I say at every memorial service, including
 At the one I led yesterday for a women I didn’t know,
 That one kind of immortality we can all be assured of are the memories
 We have...and leave.

So here’s what I’m learning these last weeks...these practices:
 To not wait for the memories to visit us, surprising us according to
 Their own whim (even though that will happen),
 To instead bring that person with you to the places you go.
 To literally say out loud, as I have been: “*I miss you! You would have
 Loved that game! Look at the car!*”
 To not just hold up and hold out the ‘good stuff.’ To find a person or people
 You can share the shadows, to dive open up that closet and haul out the skeletons, because
 this is what the living need to do,
 To not pretend that the people we loved and lost are somehow converted
 Into saints by death, as if pretending the hurt or hot temper or real damage
 Never actually happened...
 Because all that does is prevent us from grieving the whole person,
 And allowing us to accept ourselves as whole people...
 And, this practice – services like this, come. Come for yourself,

But just as much, come for the person next to you.
Because loss shared is loss held, and memories shared are memories carried...

Heather, perfect segue: *Why are rituals around death important? What are some that have been important to you?*

Heather: Why are rituals around death important? What are some that have been important to you?

Generally, rituals allow us to embody in the world that which we know already in our hearts—it is a way to externally manifest an internal transformation that has already taken place. Rituals connect us to one another, they symbolically move us through emotional processes, they allow us to heal better.

Early after someone has died, rituals allow us to physically acknowledge and begin to process the fact of death. Wakes, burials, memorial services, viewing hours, sitting shiva, these all help us to make the fact of death more real. After some time, though, rituals of remembrance allow us to feel more close to the person who has died, to help us stay connected.

The day after my dad died, my mom and my sister Amy and I were driving home from the funeral home, where we had been discussing my dad's burial. It was one of the most surreal and difficult days in my life. And suddenly, in the car, I had a moment of crystal clarity.

"I want to be there when they lower his body," I said, "and I want us to be the first ones to put dirt on the casket". Now, I was wearing two hats, as a minister who knows how important embodied rituals are, and as a daughter who just lost her dad. But this was an intuitive, gut level clarity. As a family, growing up, we had buried every beloved animal companion we had had ourselves, and each taken a turn lovingly sprinkling a handful of dirt on our dearly departed family members. Burying our animals was one of the few shared rituals my family had around death. My mom and my sister immediately agreed to this.

Now—I'll go ahead and tell you ahead of time that this is a sadly funny story, and you have my permission to laugh. Laughter and tears together can be so healing. So, later in the week, Amy and I decided that we could not use any old dirt to bury our dad—the dirt needed to come from our backyard—where he had built us a swing set and a treehouse and a beautiful handmade deck, and taught us to play soccer and baseball and held family parties. And so, we got home and went outside with a small garden spade to get some dirt from below the giant maple tree in our backyard.

But, we failed to take into account, of course, that it was January.
The ground was frozen solid.
And so, Amy got a large shovel,
and I held it in place while she jumped on it,
and it just bounced off the ice.

We looked at each other, and the look shared between us said

“We are John Concannon’s daughters
and he was an engineer through and through.
No simple matter of physics is stopping this project.”

“I said “I’ll go get a crowbar” and she immediately responded “I’ll get the sledgehammer.”
And we parted ways without another word.

Two minutes later, we were cathartically sledgehammering and prying frozen chunks of earth
away from the ground.

And once we brought the frozen chunks inside, and they started to thaw, we realized that we
had... mud.

I imagined the sickening plop of wet dirt falling onto his casket.
“There is no way I’m inviting my grandmother to throw mud on her son’s grave”, I thought.
So I spent the next several hours baking mud in my family kitchen to restore it to a
respectable dirt consistency.

In the end the ritual was beautiful, and was what I and my extended family needed.
Seeing his casket lowered gave me a sense of closure I hadn’t expected—I knew where he
was, I felt a sense of peace—heartbreak, but also peace—when we walked away from the
cemetery.

I knew he had a piece of our home with him,
And that we had blessed the dirt
With our love.

Nathan, after the burial, after the rituals—what do you think about the afterlife?

Nathan: What do I think about the afterlife?

What do I think? I think: does being clergy get me a speed pass
To the front of line, like you do at Disney or Six Flags?
And if it does, I wonder: will being UU help...or hinder?
And if it hinders, can I pull out the Catholic kid credentials?
Or will that hinder even more?

Here’s what I think: I think I don’t know what I think.
Because even though I took the class in seminary that
Revealed to us that as a Jew, Jesus didn’t believe in an afterlife
So much as ushering in a heaven here on earth...
And how the visions of heaven that some of us have got dancing in our heads,
With chubby angels and bucolic streets and harps
And loved ones around us like a never-ending holiday gathering
Where no one ever leaves (which doesn’t sound like Heaven to me, actually),
Is actually a picture created later, by church fathers, and not one that Jesus,

As a Jew, promised...
 And even though I've read the science that says how the light some see
 At the end is simply neurons firing in the last burst of life...
 And even though I've been present at more deaths than I can count,
 And I've seen a person be here...and then somehow...not be here,
 Like that (a snap of the fingers)....

I still...don't know how to reconcile how it is that we are capable
 Of such transcendence in our lives, and how it is that our spirit,
 A word means our breath, our life is able to transcend us,
 So that our lives touch others long after we're gone..
 How we can bless and be blessed, give and receive such beauty,
 Beyond our too short lives....
 and how we can feel, as I have, the presence of loved ones close,
 even though they are gone from us in a physical way...

I don't know how to reconcile all that, and not feel that we are somehow
 More than blood and skin and cells and pulse...
 So I think I don't know what I think, except to say that
 Death may only be a horizon, and a horizon is only what we
 Can see as far our sight can take us....

Heather: *How can we support others who are grieving (ie. what not to say)?*

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Shortly after my dad died, my sister's partner mentioned that in a crisis, some people in your life are firefighters, and some are builders.

Firefighters show up right after a crisis, and help to stabilize things. They simply know what is needed in that time. They come to sit with you all night after you get the news, they go to Bed Bath and Beyond at 10pm when you realize there aren't enough beds in the house. They bring food and organize rides and make calls for you.

But firefighters don't stay forever. Some people are builders. Builders are in it for the long haul. They are there help us to find the new normal. They are the people who call us weekly to go on walks, who know that you are thinking about your loss far after the memorial service is over, who ask tenderly how you are doing, who don't put a timeline on grief. Because, just like our New Orleans trip volunteers know, it takes a long time—years, decades—to rebuild after a loss.

We need both of types of people, firefighters and builders, people who are there in a crisis and people who are there for the long haul. And yes, someone can be both. We may be surprised by who shows up—and who doesn't show up. But I can say for certain that showing up imperfectly is so much better than not showing up at all.

We live in a culture that can tell us that we need to fix brokenness, and that can cause us to be uncomfortable with things that cannot be fixed, like death. And yet, when we try to fix another person's grief, explain it away, make meaning *for* another person, we diminish their opportunity to really feel the depth of their loss, to process in their own time, to heal by working through it.

So, some things *not* to say to a person grieving include:

God had a plan
 There is a reason for everything
 She is in a better place
 She brought this on herself
 You can still have another child
 Aren't you over it yet?

Things to say instead include:

I'm so sorry for your loss
 I don't know how you feel, but I'm here to help however I can.
 You've been in my thoughts.
 My favorite memory of your Mom was...
 I know it will be hard to manage the house alone, can I arrange for someone to plow your driveway this winter?
 I'm only a phone call away

Beloved,
 Whether we are the grievers, the firefighters, or the builders
 We know that we need one another
 To remind each other of the love
 That is holding us, always.
 Let us rest in that love.

Let us close by singing together our closing hymn, #15, The Lone Wild Bird.