

THE GREAT LESSON

A sermon preached by Galen Guengerich
All Souls Unitarian Church, New York City
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On Wednesday morning of this past week, my wife Holly and I made the difficult and painful decision to put down our dog Bonnie. She had been in significant decline for a number of months, but a couple of seizures hastened the process. We decided to say goodbye while Bonnie was still relatively comfortable. Holly and I were with her – and Zoe was with us by phone – when Bonnie died, peaceful and content in Holly's arms.

Bonnie had been an essential member of our family for nearly 15 years, filling our lives with unfettered joy and unconditional love. Holly, Zoe, and I wept at what we had lost.

In her poem titled *Poppies*, the contemporary American poet Mary Oliver writes:

The poppies send up their orange flares;
swaying in the wind, their congregations are a levitation
of bright dust, of thin and lacy leaves.

There isn't a place in this world that doesn't sooner or later
drown in the indigos of darkness,
but now, for a while,
the roughage shines like a miracle
as it floats above everything with its yellow hair.

Of course nothing stops the cold, dark, curved blade
from hooking forward—
of course loss is the great lesson.

There is a great lesson, the poet says, and loss is the lesson — of course. It's the great lesson we keep being taught, over and over again.

Before the blizzard intervened, we were scheduled to gather yesterday to acknowledge the death and celebrate the life of Emily Blake, who had been a buoyantly effervescent presence in this congregation for nearly two decades. Emily was perhaps best known as the 'doyenne of dining table set-up' for Monday Night Hospitality. She masterfully marshaled the energy of countless middle school students who arrived on Monday afternoons to set 28 tables — flowers, flatware, napkins, not to mention tablecloths — for more than 300 guests. She was equal parts cheerleader and traffic cop.

A lover of New York culture at its best, Emily was also a winsome and loyal friend to many of us here, as well as to many others beyond. And now she is gone.

Loss is the great lesson.

One of the compositions featured in Musica Viva's "Sounds of Remembrance" concert this afternoon is a piece for string quartet titled, *WTC 9/11*, by the contemporary composer Steve Reich. The composition interweaves music by the quartet with voice recordings related to the September 11 attacks. We hear recordings from air traffic control and the New York City Fire Department, as well as excerpts of interviews with people who lived near the attacks. It's a deeply moving composition. And it's a poignant reminder of a day many of us recall even now with vivid clarity.

I remember being in my office here at the church and getting a frantic call from Holly, who told me to turn on the television. I remember walking with Holly to pick up Zoe, who was then in the first grade at PS 6. I remember standing with the two of them in the middle of Park Avenue, staring silently south, gaping at the billowing smoke. I remember the sight of stunned survivors walking slowly north, covered with white ash. I remember the ear-shattering sound of F-16s flying low over the city. And I remember the utter silence of a great city in complete shock.

Loss is the great lesson.

This coming Wednesday, on the 70th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau, the largest of the Nazi death camps, the nations of the world will pause to commemorate International Holocaust Remembrance Day. I will never forget my first visit to Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Museum and memorial in Jerusalem. The museum building itself is very long and very narrow, and it cuts like a knife into the top of a mountain. As you pass through the museum, you walk down and down, further and further underground, as the story of the Holocaust unfolds. The slender prism of light entering from the world above grows increasingly distant and faint, until you reach the moment in the narrative when the camps are liberated, at which point you begin to move upward, toward the light once more.

At about the lowest point in your descent, you stand before a large chart prepared for a Nazi conference on the so-called final solution to the Jewish problem. The chart lists the number of Jews in the world by country. The Nazis had counted a total of 11 million Jews worldwide at the time. You realize with chilling clarity that this chart wasn't a census; it was a list of targets. By Nazi count, they had eleven million Jews to exterminate. When the war ended, the Nazis were more than halfway to their goal.

Loss is the great lesson.

If Mary Oliver is right that loss is the great lesson, and I think she is, then what's the lesson? What do our experiences of loss — whether unexpected or anticipated, whether monumental or incremental, whether terrible or acceptable — teach us? What should we learn from our experiences of loss?

The first lesson is that loss is inevitable. There isn't a place in this world to which loss doesn't eventually come, the poet says. Sooner or later, death comes to us all.

Sooner or later other kinds of losses come to us as well. There's nothing we can do to prevent it. There's no where we can hide to get away from it.

That's not to say we don't try. We spend billions of dollars each year trying to stave off the visual and physiological signs of aging. And we medicate ourselves in various ways trying to fend off the pain of losses we fear and losses we have suffered. But all our efforts eventually avail us nothing. Loss is inevitable. Sooner or later, it comes to us all.

The second lesson is that loss is painful. The poet describes how the cold curved blade comes hooking forward. Death isn't called the grim reaper for nothing. And whether our losses involve death or not, the experience of loss cuts into the very fabric of our lives, ripping something away from us, tearing our lives asunder.

Sometimes the pain of loss gets infinitely multiplied by the wicked brutality of its agents. More was lost on 9/11 than 2,977 individual lives, several planes, and a couple of skyscrapers. We also lost some of our naïveté as a nation. And more was lost in the Holocaust than 6 million individual Jewish lives. We lost some of our naïveté as a civilization. These searing losses cut away at our innocence — our Enlightenment-fueled optimism in the goodness of humanity and the irreversibility of progress.

Loss is painful — and sometimes it's made brutally and wickedly so. But even losses that are anticipated and acceptable can tear us apart.

The third lesson is perhaps the most important one. It's that loss is essential. Like gravity, loss grounds us and keeps us centered. It reminds us that we must value what we have and treasure what we have lost.

After observing that loss is the great lesson, Mary Oliver concludes her poem with the following lines:

But I also say this: that light
is an invitation to happiness,
and that happiness, when it's done right,
is a kind of holiness, palpable and redemptive.

Inside the bright fields,
touched by their rough and spongy gold,
I am washed and washed
in the river of earthly delight —

and what are you going to do —
what *can* you do about it —
deep, blue night?

Only when we have known the pain of loss — the pain of death, the pain of lesser losses, perhaps the brutal pain of human wickedness — can we fully receive the

invitation to happiness. Only when we have tilled the fields of earthly sorrow can we wash ourselves in the river of earthly delight.

The experience of loss, whether actual or potential, turns out to make happiness possible. Only as we accept that we will sooner or later lose what we have — our health, our feeling of safety, our loved ones and friends, even our pets — can we fully value what we have. And what can the night do about the light — the light that redeems our losses and invites us into happiness?

Nothing, the poet implies: the night can do nothing. Night loses its power when daylight appears. In the same way, loss loses its power when we accept that happiness comes to us not in the absence of loss, but rather in its presence. With loss as a once and future backdrop, we can fully embrace the invitation — the invitation to happiness, the invitation to holiness, the invitation to earthly delight.

I don't know what losses you are remembering or grieving today. I don't know what losses you fear might someday come your way. But I do know that the invitation to happiness opens when we accept that loss is inevitable, that it will always be painful and sometimes brutal, and that it's an essential part of a well-lived life. Loss reminds us to value what we have and to hold close what we have lost.

Give the people you love an extra embrace today. Give your pet — if you have one — an extra treat. Wash yourself in the river of earthly delight. Love your life. At least for now, it's yours to cherish.