

WHAT THE LIVING DO

A Sermon Preached by Pamela Patton
Unitarian Church of All Souls, New York City
January 1, 2017

Readings:

Let Evening Come by Jane Kenyon

Let the light of late afternoon
shine through chinks in the barn, moving
up the bales as the sun moves down.

Let the cricket take up chafing
as a woman takes up her needles
and her yarn. Let evening come.

Let dew collect on the hoe abandoned
in long grass. Let the stars appear
and the moon disclose her silver horn.

Let the fox go back to its sandy den.
Let the wind die down. Let the shed
go black inside. Let evening come.

To the bottle in the ditch, to the scoop
in the oats, to air in the lung
let evening come.

Let it come, as it will, and don't
be afraid. God does not leave us
comfortless, so let evening come.

What the Living Do by Marie Howe

Johnny, the kitchen sink has been clogged for days, some utensil probably fell down there.
And the Drano won't work but smells dangerous, and the crusty dishes have piled up

waiting for the plumber I still haven't called. This is the everyday we spoke of.
It's winter again: the sky's a deep, headstrong blue, and the sunlight pours through

the open living-room windows because the heat's on too high in here and I can't turn it off.
For weeks now, driving, or dropping a bag of groceries in the street, the bag breaking,

I've been thinking: This is what the living do. And yesterday, hurrying along those
wobbly bricks in the Cambridge sidewalk, spilling my coffee down my wrist and sleeve,

I thought it again, and again later, when buying a hairbrush: This is it.
Parking. Slamming the car door shut in the cold. What you called that yearning.

What you finally gave up. We want the spring to come and the winter to pass. We want
whoever to call or not call, a letter, a kiss—we want more and more and then more of it.

But there are moments, walking, when I catch a glimpse of myself in the window glass,
say, the window of the corner video store, and I'm gripped by a cherishing so deep

for my own blowing hair, chapped face, and unbuttoned coat that I'm speechless:
I am living. I remember you.

Sermon:

The New Year has arrived. At All Souls our New Year's service traditionally focuses on the relationship between loss and hope. Lighting candles for those we love is a tribute to their indelible influence on us, how we keep them with us in the form of companionship and inspiration, and in the form of grief. As we worship together, meditating on our losses, we find ourselves fully aware of our fragility and our opportunities.

Pairing loss with hope is not a denial of the sadness and anger generated by loss. Hope can be a corollary to loss if we accept our sadness, knowing that we are not our sadness. For many of us, some of the nights over the past year have been oppressively long as we've contemplated losses. For most of us, there is a penetrating grief we've become accustomed to. Though we navigate our days with a straight face when we're in public, nights can be an invitation to pain.

Episcopal Priest Barbara Brown Taylor writes, "Pain makes theologians of us all." Any kind of pain—physical, emotional, spiritual—has the awesome potential to tear open our hearts and forcefully prod us into words like "Please, God, no." or just plain "Help." This can even happen to those of us who may bristle when we hear the word God or prayer. Yet, with these words, we are opening our hearts to pain and an invitation to a wondrous courage that we might not otherwise discover.

In her book *An Alter in the World*, Taylor exemplifies this in a story of physical pain. While pruning trees in her yard, a piece of bark fell into her eye. The stabbing pain was immediate and overwhelming. She dropped her sheers and fled inside to rinse her eye. (If you have ever scratched your cornea, you know the intensity of the stabbing.) Taylor's husband took her to the emergency room where they anesthetized her eye. The relief enabled her to fall asleep, but the anesthesia wore off in the middle of the night, and she woke to abject agony. She writes, "While the grandfather clock in the dining room tolled hour after hour, I prayed the kind of prayers I never thought I would pray. I began the kind of bargaining with God that I do not even believe in, and when that did not work I called God's honor into question. I begged God to do something. I dared God to do something. Finally, close to dawn, I found myself turning away from the God in charge of pain removal toward the God who had stayed with me through the pain no matter what I had said."

Despite Taylor's experience as a priest, her search for solace during her desperate night did not affirm the God she had already defined. Instead the night led her to a deeper confidence in her faith. As she asked the existential questions more fervently by the hour, she found a new source of comfort. When we are in great pain—physical, emotional, spiritual—we are completely exposed and we have the opportunity to open to transcendence. The experience of hearing ourselves in all our fragility allows us to understand that we are not our pain.

Jane Kenyon's poem, *Let Evening Come*, is a declaration of her faith in the midst of a life challenged by mental illness and cancer. In the final stanza she writes:

Let evening come.
Let it come, as it will, and don't
be afraid. God does not leave us
comfortless, so let evening come.

Like Taylor, Kenyon's pain led her to a source of comfort.

Kenyon was married to Donald Hall, also a poet, and during their marriage, they were both diagnosed with cancer. When Hall was diagnosed, he was told he would not live long. Kenyon wrote a poem about the prospect of life without her husband. In the poem she describes herself and Hall departing from a poetry reading together when he was very ill:

After music and poetry we walk to the car.
I believe in the miracles of art, but what
prodigy will keep you safe beside me,
fumbling with the radio while you drive
to find late innings of a Red Sox game?

The couple suffered through the looming possibility of his death for several years. Eventually he was pronounced cancer-free. Life seemed safe for a little while. Hall described their happiest year together as the one they would remember least, because everything was routine (*Companions for the Passage*, Marjorie Ryerson).

Kenyon was diagnosed with leukemia in her mid-40s. Her cancer was not treatable and she died at age 47. Hall described their marriage as "one soul in two bodies." After Kenyon died he felt a constant urge to talk about her. He described himself eating dinner in the local diner when the man next to him asked for the ketchup bottle. Hall handed him the ketchup and said, "Here. My wife liked ketchup. She died of leukemia. She was forty seven." As time passed, his impulsive mentions of her became less frequent and his unpredictable slipping into a dream-like state in which he would envelope himself in missing her also became less frequent. He visited her grave often on walks. On her gravestone, he inscribed "I believe in the miracles of art, but what prodigy will keep you safe beside me?"

Poets do not use words like prodigy without a sense of adventure; the word comes from the Latin word, prodigium, which means omen or a sign of things to come. Kenyon's and Hall's poems about each other pay tribute to the bountiful mystery that was essential to their lives as poets and lovers.

In our yearning for those we have lost, our acceptance of transcendence, we experience the depths of our humanity. 20 years ago my father and my dear friend, Vince, died within a few days of each other. They both suffered from neurodegenerative diseases. My father died at 67, and Vince at 31. I started coming to worship here at All Souls a year before they died. At that time, I spent most of my week functioning—working, socializing—but my straight face was punctuated by private moments of suffocation by grief.

When my father died, our dear family friend and Priest, Father Connolly, conducted the funeral. Father Connolly had ushered my siblings and me all through our sacraments—Baptism, first communion, marriage, and finally a funeral. Afterwards he said to me, “Grief is the price you pay for love.” At the time, I was consoled, and it is indeed an important angle from which to understand loss. But now I would say that grief is a way to continue to feel the love, though it is not the only way.

Living without my father and my friend drove me to understand that I am not self-sufficient and that my sadness would never go away. My continued relationship to them is an acknowledgement that I am not my sadness. I had to define for myself a spiritual life that would enable me to continue to yearn for them while building strength for the rest of my journey.

Loss leads us to hope by way of gratitude for prodigies who keep us safe even after they’ve died. Gratitude plants the seeds for hope. Gratitude does not deny pain, but it broadens our view, incorporating aspects of our lives besides our suffering.

Marie Howe’s poem, *What the Living Do*, speaks of the yearning for life as she contemplates her brother’s absence after he died. Like Kenyon, she experiences gratitude for the clarity her loss provides, the gratitude for life that it exposes. She ends her poem:

But there are moments, walking, when I catch a glimpse of myself in the window glass,
say, the window of the corner video store, and I’m gripped by a cherishing so deep

for my own blowing hair, chapped face, and unbuttoned coat that I’m speechless:
I am living. I remember you.

As we contemplate losses and as we anticipate losses, it is possible to accept sorrow while knowing we are not our sorrow. Our immersion in loss, our memory of loss can be a transcendent experience, and lead us to a cherishing of life and love that comes from thanks for the teachings of the prodigies whom we love and who loved us.

What does the new year have to offer us? If we are lucky, we will have 365 days to wake up and say “This is the day we are given, let us rejoice and be glad in it.” We will have 365 days for our losses to expose us to our depths and our hopes.