

## THE POIGNANCY OF IMPERMANENCE

The Unitarian Church of All Souls, New York City  
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Whosoever wishes to know about the world must learn about  
it in its particular details.  
Knowledge is not intelligence.  
In searching for the truth be ready for the unexpected;  
Change alone is unchanging.  
The same road goes both up and down.  
The beginning of a circle is also its end.  
Not I but the world says it: all is one,  
and yet everything comes in season.

--Heraclitus of Ephesus

What we call a beginning is often the end,  
and to make an end is to make a beginning.  
The end is where we start from.

We shall not cease from exploration,  
and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started  
and know the place for the first time.

--T.S. Eliot *The Four Quartets*

Unless you happen to have spent this past year on the space station or perhaps living on an ashram somewhere in Asia, you have by now probably ascertained that today marks an especially poignant and complex moment in the life of this community. After 38 continuous years of extraordinary and creative service as the Minister of Music of this congregation Walter Klauss steps down from that position after today. As a community we have been wrestling with this information for the past year, and we have been paying our respects and saying our goodbyes to Wally for over a month now. It is not my intention to prolong that process with yet another *festschrift*. So you can relax Wally. This is not going to be about you. This will be about us, about the impact of this event on us as individuals, on us as a community. Let us reflect for a few moments on what it means to live with loss, to live on after experiencing real loss. Of course loss comes in different sizes—anywhere from annoying to horrific. But whatever the shape or size, the experience of loss is and will continue to be one of the most formidable experiences we ever face. And it is the gift that keeps on giving.

One of the first things to notice is when confronting others in the midst of significant loss how difficult it usually is to find any appropriate words. The plain truth is, some situations leave us speechless, or else stumbling about to come up with just the right words. Here's an example: a man on a business excursion in a distant city comes unexpectedly upon a very old and cherished friend he had not seen or been in communication with for several years. They are overjoyed to see one another and decide to sit for a while over coffee to catch up. After some time one of the friends inquires of the other, "Oh, by the way, how is Betty, your wife?" To which his friend replies, "Oh, you must not have heard. Betty died three years ago and went to heaven." "Oh, no," says his friend, "I am so sorry." Realizing his mistake he tries again: Wait. . .I mean...I mean, I'm happy." Now he is really rattled: "No. . .no, no,. . .I mean. . ." "I'm surprised." See what I mean. There are lots of occasions when finding the right words or an appropriate response just seems out of reach. Well, today is just such an occasion.

One reason we feel bereft and at a loss for words right now is that this moment is emblematic of so many other moments with such a familiar wrenching quality. Today, for example, is a stark reminder of what this community endured only five years ago when our senior minister for 30 years, Forrest Church, was dying of cancer. Now we are bidding farewell to yet another longstanding and beloved member of this church's ministry, one whose work has brought exhilaration and comfort and joy and spiritual nourishment for many years. We can be forgiven for wondering out loud how we will fare. "What will this place be like without Wally?" we ask? Galen was right two weeks ago when he proclaimed that we are experiencing the end of an era. But please, at least notice that he said it is the end of an era; it is not the end of this community which after all is remarkably strong, blessed with gifted people, and quite resilient.

About a year ago I came upon a splendid essay in the Times "Sunday Review" section by Mark Epstein with an arresting title: "The Trauma of Being Alive." Mr. Epstein is both a practicing psychotherapist and a practicing Buddhist here in New York, and I have found his writings especially insightful for years. He began by recalling a recent conversation with his mother who was having difficulty coming to terms with the death of her husband a few years earlier. "You'd think I would be over it by now," she said, referring to the pain of losing a husband of more than 60 years. "It's been more than four and a half years." Epstein responded to his mother in this way: "Trauma never goes away completely. It changes perhaps, softens some with time, but never completely goes away. What makes you think you should be over it? I don't think it works that way." I was greatly relieved to find someone willing to talk about loss in this honest manner. For the truth is that each of us has already suffered significant losses. That is so whether you are relatively young or relatively old, though I admit the older you get the more your losses seem to pile up and strike one as inexorable. And we all know, deep within—though we do not like to linger there—that before we complete our journey, there will be more to come.

When it comes to grief, however, we in this culture frequently seem to have a huge attention deficit disorder. We openly celebrate our successes and our triumphs but seek to minimize or hide our grief from one another, even—God save us—from ourselves. We especially prize people who soldier on in the face of loss. We like it when others do not impose their personal pain upon us. We are a people in love with "the power of positive thinking." Grief feels negative to us and we seek to avoid it at all costs. "Come on," we say to those who are in

mourning, “time to get over it.” Is it any wonder that depression is so rampant among us? As most psychotherapists will testify, one of the chief hidden causes of depression is the refusal to mourn.

So Mark Epstein noted in his essay, “My mother’s knee-jerk reaction, ‘Shouldn’t I be over this by now?’ is very common. There is a *rush to normal* in many of us that closes us off to our own suffering but also, as a consequence, to the suffering of others.” Though our immediate response to another’s painful loss may be empathy, underneath we are mostly conditioned to believe that “normal” is where we all should be and that health resides in returning to that state as quickly as possible. Mr. Epstein went on to observe, “Trauma is not just the result of major disasters. It does not happen only to some people. An undercurrent of trauma runs through ordinary life, shot through as it is with the poignancy of impermanence. . . While we are accustomed to thinking of trauma as the inevitable result of major cataclysm, daily life is filled with endless little traumas. Things break. People hurt our feelings. Ticks carry Lyme disease. Pets die. Friends get sick; sometimes they die.” And I would add: our bodies wear down and push back and sometimes behave like strangers who never knew us.

But why is it, I ask myself, that we tend to feel so much more at home with our anger than we do with our grief? Perhaps it is that anger allows us the slight illusion that we are still in control. Grief, on the other hand, reminds us that we are quite vulnerable, that much of what we value most about our lives lies beyond our control. The spiritual practice of mourning is the necessary process through which we come to terms with the knowledge that what is most permanent is the “poignancy of impermanence.”

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In my own personal experience it has been most often during those moments when I was attempting to cope with loss that music has come to have deepest significance for me. Words challenge, words may offer spiritual comfort, words can invite fresh insight, and in all these ways words can be effective. But when we are especially vulnerable—and as a result we are most receptive—music has the power to penetrate deeper, speaks to heart and soul, conducts us to a substrata of deeper emotional intuition. And in those rare moments when thoughts and music unite to produce a unique bond and spiritual experience, in such moments we are frequently deeply moved and may even undergo spiritual transformation. In my mind that is one of the things we mean when we speak of “religious experience.”

Let me share a brief story that illustrates this point from a somewhat different perspective. Years ago I came across the personal memoir of the writer William Styron that he titled *Darkness Visible: A Memoir of Madness*. Most of you are familiar with Styron’s extraordinary works of fiction that include such novels as *Lie Down In Darkness*, *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, and *Sophie’s Choice*. But *Darkness Visible* is not a work of fiction; it is the chronicle of a man who, at the age of 60, at the height of his imaginative powers, descended suddenly and inexplicably into the hell of a profound depression from whose grip he could not extricate himself. Weeks went by, then months, with no respite from the torment his mind forced him to endure relentlessly. He acknowledged that the word “depression” scarcely

conveys the depth of agony he was experiencing day by day. Had it not already been appropriated for another purpose, he reported that he would have found it more accurate and truthful to name what he was experiencing a “brainstorm.”

Though surrounded by a loving wife and daughters and several friends who offered him loving support and comfort, Styron continued to sink deeper and deeper into despair. With no remedy in sight, and finding no help in psychiatric treatment, he confessed that he finally concluded the only avenue to end the pain, the only respite he could imagine was to end his own life. He reports that he carefully put all of his affairs in order, arranged for the support of his surviving family members, and made a specific plan to carry out his intention to end things. Waiting, on the night he had chosen to take his own life until his wife and family had gone to sleep, Styron reports that he sat alone watching the tape of a film on television, preparing himself for his last moments. At one point in the film the main character moves down the hallway of a music conservatory. Suddenly from behind the walls comes a rich contralto voice in a surprising, soaring passage from a memorable piece of music that he recognized immediately. This is how Styron describes what followed:

This sound, which like all music—indeed like all pleasure—I had been numbly unresponsive to for months, pierced my heart like a dagger, and in a flood of swift recollection I thought of all the joys the house had known: the children who had rushed through its rooms, the festivals, the love and work, the honestly earned slumber, the voices and nimble commotion, the perennial tribe of cats and dogs and birds. All this I realized was more than I could ever abandon, even as what I had set out so deliberately to do was more than I could inflict on those memories, and upon those so close to me, with whom the memories were bound. . . . I drew upon some last gleam of sanity to perceive the terrifying dimensions of the mortal predicament I had fallen into.

At that moment Styron quietly rose, went to wake up his wife and announced, “You have to take me to the hospital.”

When I first read it, I was myself in mourning for a significant personal loss. I was quite affected by this account—this simple, straightforward account of how music may have the power to stop us in our tracks, to penetrate to the soul, even when—or especially when—all other forms of communication have missed the mark. But I was emotionally overwhelmed a week later when by chance I attended a concert during which for the very first time I actually heard the music that had affected Styron so profoundly. We know the work as the Alto Rhapsody whose composer is Johannes Brahms. It is his musical interpretation of an equally powerful poem by Goethe that he set for orchestra, solo alto voice, and a male chorus. Perhaps you are familiar with it. If you were fortunate enough to attend the final Musica Viva concert under Wally’s direction a few weeks ago, you will remember that it was the very piece he selected to open his final concert that evening. You would have been privileged to hear it performed by the magnificent male voices of our choir and the incomparable contralto Barbara Fusco.

But I invite you to listen again to a recording of the Brahms’ Alto Rhapsody while holding this story about William Styron close to memory. Goethe’s words themselves have

enormous power. He opens by describing a solitary individual in the throes of a torment close to that which Styron must himself have endured. Brahms interprets these words accurately with a disturbingly agitated passage sung by the alto voice that perfectly evokes the spirit of bitterness and perplexity and despair of this figure. But in the closing stanza Goethe shifts the entire mood from agitation to peace with a brief prayer on behalf of this individual, and by implication, on behalf of each one of us during seasons of distress:

If there is in thy psalter, Father of Love.  
One tone that can reach his ear,  
Then refresh his heart!  
Show to his clouded sight  
The thousand springs  
Near the thirsty one in the desert.

The words alone are magnificent. But the effect of these words joined to the uncannily beautiful music of Brahms' composition is simply magnificent: a soaring hymn-like melody by the alto soloist backed by a chorus of male voices. It is truly indescribable. You must experience it yourself to understand what I mean.

One final word about Styron. After entering psychotherapy, what emerged as a significant source of his depression had to do with the death of his mother many years earlier when he was still a youth. During a long psychotherapeutic process he came to realize that he had never mourned his mother's death. A healing of sorts would only be possible by revisiting that painful episode during his formative years. What I came to appreciate by way of his generous sharing of his story are two things: First, there are profound consequences to our psyche and to our spiritual well being that accompany a refusal to mourn our losses. Grief is a spiritual practice without which we are unlikely to come to a full knowledge of our true selves. And second, one of the most significant resources we have to draw upon to accompany us on that journey is the gift of music—music that speaks directly to our spiritual need and lifts us by its power to a sacred space where transformation may truly be possible.

So Wally here we are at the end of an era, mourning one more loss of yet another person who has been significant in our lives. Ironically, our very mourning drives us to celebrate. We celebrate the depth to which you have invited us week after week over the years to experience music's healing properties. We celebrate the gift of imagination with which you have engaged so many magnificent musicians—members of the All Souls Choir, the Community Choir, instrumentalists, organ students—to join you in that journey from the surface to the very core of music's vast sacred substance. And if that were not enough, then inspired them to turn and share that experience with all of us. Such moments have empowered us both to grieve our losses while at the very same time to outgrow our bitterness and embrace a spirit of gratitude. So we bid you farewell, filled with gratitude for your friendship, for the love you have poured into your work and into your relationships, for your decency, for your humanity. We know your work is not yet complete, that you will continue to share these gifts with many others. The reality is this is your final official moments with us, and we are so very sorry. Wait. . .wait, I mean. . . we are happy. No, no, I mean . . . we're surprised.

God speed dear friend. And God bless us all.

