

Winter Faith and Summer Faith

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For many years I loved my yoga practice. It was a major portion of my physical and spiritual well-being. Doing yoga gave me such a deep sense of grounding and quiet joy in my body. But finding a place to practice yoga with others was really challenging for me. I am what is called a “highly sensitive person. The brains of “HS people actually process the chemical dopamine differently. This means we can be easily over-stimulated by environmental and social factors. It’s why I don’t like really loud music or the State Fair. So when I do yoga, I need to be in a quiet place, with a quiet leader.

But most yoga studios are corporate franchises that pump out yoga teachers like Big Mac hamburgers and teach yoga to pumping pop music. This is what sells in America. For years I struggled with this. It was not my idea of yoga at all. I wanted to enter a deeply contemplate state; I wanted to be ultra aware, not blasted by loud music. I tried hard to get over my resistance to the loud music yoga classes, thinking that if I **should** be able to get beyond being bothered by the music. Yoga is about rising above it all, I told myself. But I often left classes angry and frustrated, until I learned about my brain!

After searching a long time for the right studio or right teacher for me, I finally found one just a mile from my home in Minneapolis. Jonah walked into a dimly lit room as each class began, gently reciting a short poem or piece of prose. He then magically wove a reflection through the whole class, often repeating words and phrases in just the right way. The way he did this helped me literally capture

the teaching and absorb the wisdom into my body. Jonah is a practicing Buddhist, primarily a spiritual teacher, who uses yoga as his tool.

I had been enjoying Jonah's classes for about a year. I showed up one day, expecting the usual. His theme for the day was *dancing through life*, so we did the entire class to old Motown hits. Not exactly what I wanted but it was fun. I went to another class a few days later and the theme was *living with gusto*. He turned on grating electronic music and I thought, "OK, we're going to warm up to this." But no, this grinding, whining, loud, blasting, irritating music played during the entire hour. And I spent the entire hour trying not to scream and throw my mat. Near the end, we were doing a stretch on the floor and I just started crying. I picked up my mat and walked out.

First I noticed that I was really angry. Underneath the anger was sadness, sadness that I was going to lose the best teacher I had found yet. I was grieving the loss of yet another teacher selling out to the yoga fitness craze instead of holding quiet and contemplative space.

Now, hold that story in mind while I share another one.

About 18 months into a ministry in a congregation, I happened to be chatting with a Board Member of the congregation. This congregation had recently parted with their previous minister who served for 10 years and who then had to leave when there was a budget crisis and the position was further cut. I was trying to get the congregation through this rough patch and learn what they could do to build better relationships and organizational structures that would allow them to be find another minister in the future.

While chatting with this Board Member, he said to me “*You know, I was very skeptical of you for a long time. In fact, I wasn’t sure that I would like you at all. I was watching every move you made with a critical eye.*” I was shocked; I had no idea he had held this attitude. I asked him what I had done to make him so wary. “Oh, you just weren’t Rev. X. I missed X and I was not ready for a new minister yet.” This Board Member had been grieving his former minister, which impacted how he could relate to me. Grief impacts us and those around us.

Just as I carried my own grief from so many frustrating attempts to find a calm yoga studio, into Jonah’s yoga studio, this Board Member brought his own grief to his expectations of my ministry. We all carry grief. Grief is actually good if we know what to do with it. Grief done well is a kind of hospitality of the heart in which we can work out our losses and integrate their meanings into our lives.

*This being human is a guesthouse.
Every morning a new arrival.*

*A joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes
as an unexpected visitor.*

*Welcome and entertain them all!
Even if they're a crowd of sorrows,
who violently sweep your house
empty of its furniture,
still, treat each guest honorably.
He may be clearing you out
for some new delight...*

Rumi's wisdom is easier said than done, right? Most of us struggle with grief. How do we do it well without just pasting a summery smile on our face and sweeping it under the rug? Most importantly, We acknowledge that grief is real, we make room for it, and let it run its course.

There is a Buddhist teaching story about a woman, named Kiza, who gave birth to a beautiful boy. When just a few months old, the baby grew sick and died. Needless to say, Kiza was immediately stricken with despair. She learned that Buddha was in town so she ran to him carrying her baby's body in her arms. *"My lord, give me medicine!"*

The Buddha looked down at her child's lifeless body and back up at her. "I have a cure for your baby." He said. *"You must find me a mustard seed. But it must be from a household that has not experienced sickness and death."*

Kiza ran from door to door asking for a mustard seed and AND if anyone in the household had experienced sickness and death in their families. Every household had stories to tell. Some grieved for loved ones long ago passed away; some as recent as the day before. All showed a shadow of sadness in their eyes. From household to household, Kiza was witness to their suffering. Slowly her mind 'woke up' and she realized that her child was gone and though she must grieve, she would survive. She buried her boy that evening, and the next morning came to the Buddha.

"The mustard seed has done it's work," she said.

"Did you find one that cured your child?" he asked?

"No, my lord", she said.

"Come; sit beside me. We are all subject to sickness and

death. Whether rich or poor, king or common, we all must grow old and die. Life is short. ... understand that all of us suffer. Treat everyone with compassion.”

Over time, by comforting others in their time of grief and loss, Kiza Gotami slowly found happiness again.

Such a hard task. Just this past week a new book came out by a MN writer that tells the story of a woman who did just that. I think we probably all know the name Jacob Wetterling, the boy from near St. Joseph, who was abducted in October, of 1989 while he and his brother were riding their bikes home from a little store in a rural area. His abduction shocked that us all and rattled us to the core. And through the decades of suffering his parents started an organization to help other families whose children were missing. Patty Wetterling’s book chronicles their unimaginable journey through grief to compassion and making the world a bit better.

A Winter Faith is one that knows we must sometimes go to the barren place of grief as part of the balance of life. With a Winter Faith we invite our grief to come in, to sit down and have a cup of tea. Instead of battling it as an enemy, we listen to it and learn from it. And then, when spring or summer finally come to our heart, we release our grief out the back door. We plant the rotting squash in the earth and eventually see the new life growing around us.

My guess is that many of us are holding various kinds of losses. I want to mention 4 types: Loss of possessions, developmental losses, loss of parts of ourselves, and the loss of others. And though I may talk about them as separate and discrete, they are all connected.

In some ways, the loss of our possessions is the most tangible

kind of loss. Our belongings may be destroyed by a fire, or stolen, lost or eventually wear out... We may have a business fail, a car accident, or move from our home. Most of us would probably like to assert that our material possessions are not what we cherish above all else. And yet material possessions are often important to us because they are links to beloved people, special places, meaningful experiences, or embody our values. These losses matter.

Another category of loss is developmental loss. These are losses we are likely to face as we grow and change. In childhood we give up a blankie and we eventually move from a crib to a bed. We graduate from stages of education, we outgrow beliefs or previous values. How well I remember the Christmas during which I figured out the truth about Santa Claus. As the younger generations say, "Adulting is hard!"

Loss is also complicated because is often connected to gain. For example, when we choose a spouse or partner, we gain a companion but lose our singleness. When we have children, however much loved and wanted, we lose sleep and privacy and the chance to think or speak in complete sentences for years on end. When we retire, we lose our familiar status and role, but gain time for other activities.

A third category of loss is loss of parts of one's self. This is

especially true in terms of illness as a person loses the functioning of certain body parts. We can lose a general sense of strength, health, or mobility as we age.

A year ago I was diagnosed with severe osteoporosis and was told I needed to give up yoga. AND Mountain Biking and downhill skiing which I learned when I was 3, and Ice skating. It was so much to give up for me, I have always been an athlete and loves the outdoors.

On top of that, a year ago I also ended up with Long COVID, which has also been a long journey with wave after wave of symptoms roaming through my body. Last week, in desperation to a month long siege of my body by the latest round of symptoms, I decided that I had been on the osteoporosis medication for a full year and my spine was not likely to break from some simple yoga. I got out my mat, started a fire in the fireplace, put on some soft music, and did yoga for an hour and a half. The next morning, all of my newest symptoms were gone. I am so grateful to have yoga back in my life and for the wellness it brings.

Finally, the fourth category of loss is the loss of significant others: a lost friendship, a pet dying, losses through death and divorce, friends moving away. When we lose someone important to us, we can feel that we have lost a part of ourselves, the part of

ourselves that especially comes alive with the other. This can be a long grieving process.

Right now the world is grieving for the war between Israel and Hamas. The attack in Israel left me physically ill and shocked into a kind of paralysis, a grief so deep that I don't quite know where or how to hold it. Thank goodness that the Cease fire was negotiated, prisoners and hostages released, and AID trucks arrived in Gaza.

And now the fighting rages on. I cannot fix this. Nor can you. My WINTER FAITH counsels that all I can do is reach out to both my Jewish friends and Palestinian friends and acknowledge the pain all the way around. In my Winter Faith I hope beyond hope that this war might finally hasten a just and equitable solution in the Middle East.

Historian Howard Zinn shares his long view of history this way:

To be hopeful in bad times is based on the fact that human history is not only of cruelty, but also of compassion, sacrifice, courage and kindness. If we see only the worst, it destroys our capacity to do something.

If we remember those times and places where people have behaved magnificently, this gives us the energy to act. And if we do act, in however small a way, we don't have to wait for some grand Utopian Future. The future is an infinite succession of presents, and to live now as we think human beings should live, in defiance of all

that is bad around us, is itself a marvelous victory.

Perhaps it is worth a reminder here that we can grieve not only for what we had and lost, but also for what we never had. We can grieve the hopes, dreams, desires that have gone unfulfilled: the lover not chosen, the road not taken, the job we didn't get, the childhood we didn't have.

All our lives we will face losses. We can be grieving for different things at the same time, and be in different stages with each one. Depending on the depth of grief, the grieving process may take an hour, a day, a year, or a decade. Sometimes, even generations.

To have a winter faith means that we acknowledge the losses in life and give them due respect. The Rev. Alla Bozarth, an Episcopal priest and poet writes, *"Finding the way back to the missing part of myself, reclaiming it from the person or thing now gone is the process I call grieving. It is, literally, a lifesaving process. Grieving is not only the way we survive a hurtful loss, but it is the way we can learn to live more creatively through and beyond the loss, into and out of a deeper part of ourselves... Grieving is a way beyond the endurance of life, back to the enjoyment of the gift of life."*

Summer Faith is impatient with grief, wants us to just get over it, to think positive and whistle a happy tune. And these can be helpful tactics in helping us move forward. A breezy, lightness of heart has

its gifts. But denying the real work of healing the heart and soul is a way of denying the depth of our love, our hope, whatever it is that we grieve. To grieve well is not a waste of time; it is a way of honoring the complexity of life.

Winter is just beginning. I will be dazzled by the snow and the lights for a while. And then I will tire of it. The snow will get dirty; I will long to feel warm without wearing a wool sweater and a down jacket. I will ache for a little color to the landscape. But every year, the opposite is also true; by the end of August, I'm tired of the heat. I long for some crisp evenings, for juicy apples and the coziness of sitting by the fire. So it goes, year after year. So, too, go the seasons of our lives. Filled with lushness and sunlight, birdsong and color. Sometimes barren, still, sunk deeply into the dark and the waiting for release. And all of the seasons of the heart in-between.

May we trust in the fullness of a faith that welcomes all the seasons. May we love well and grieve well. And be blessed by the wisdom of the well-loved squash that goes back into the earth, to grow again in the summer.