

“In the Midst of Shadows”

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Recently my friend, Barbara, shared with me an email exchange she had with another friend regarding her husband’s battle with a rare and thus far incurable cancer. Barbara’s friend, at the end of her email, offered the thought and blessing, “Remember that God is holding you and Jeff in the palm of his hand.”

Barbara responded, “Yes, I only wish that God would stop clapping!”

Life can feel that way can’t it? As though you are beaten over and over and over. Whether or not you even believe in God, life can suddenly slip out of control and go all-wrong. Even with the best-laid plans and hopes and hard work, life often goes other than we wish. Sometimes we can see the reigns slipping from our grasp as if in slow motion and we find ourselves powerless to stop it – hands clenched closed hard and yet life spins out of control anyway. And sometimes they simply drop suddenly.

Unitarian Universalists historically haven’t much liked to dwell on the ugly element of our nature or of life, though our history is also full of courageous acts on the behalf of righteousness and justice, we have focused more on how to better the world and its citizens than we have the very nature we are trying to correct. We have believed strongly in humanity’s ability to overcome the worst of our tendencies. We call it salvation through character, meaning that if we behave as good people, do the right things, then we are assuring for ourselves a heavenly afterlife (assuming there is one). We have believed and acted on the notion that because humanity is the most influential species on the planet, and because we have the skill of reason and the ability to change ourselves, that we also have the power to alter the world’s future - and in doing so change our essential nature and the lessen the possibility of suffering altogether.

Edwin Buehrer, in our reading this morning, pointed to this very idea in speaking of our pain, “Accept it, but do not yield to it...transform it, use it for the rebuilding and renewal of your personal life.” Use your pain and suffering as tool, as an opportunity for change. This all sounds good doesn’t it? But there is a pitfall here if we see our pain as only a means to bettering the self then we lose all real meaning it may offer.

“Life hurts,” writes Ernest Kurtz and Katherine Ketcham in their book *The Spirituality of Imperfection*, “where is there growth without suffering? Pain is not without its reasons, for it serves the purpose of telling us that ‘something is wrong,’ something does not fit. Pain, with its intense message of ‘unfittingness,’ moves us to move on in our pilgrimage, to seek new ways of fitting into our own being and into the community of other (imperfect) beings. Life hurts, but in the hurt is the potential for healing.”

The Zen Buddhist idea of living fully in the moment is often referenced in a positive context, when referring to moments of joy or love or moments filled with calm and centeredness. But if the concept is to hold any truth it must be true for all moments, even those filled with anguish and pain.

“The heart is not a human heart until it feels the stab of pain.” Wrote A. Powell Davies, “To every soul there is this pain and potency – to every soul in its loneliness. You know it when grief comes. You know it in the dark night of your own life’s wilderness. Though friends [maybe] near and companionship sweet, yet you are still alone. In the wilderness, there is none beside you.”

Even when we know ourselves to be alone in our suffering, for no other can carry our pain but us, we still seek something or someone to help us through. We may look to our friends and family for support, we may go jogging or for a drive. No matter what we

do in those moments when we find ourselves in the place of shadows, we are seeking some solace, some respite, some ease of our pain. And we hope to find there a gift of grace. For many the Holy is such a giver of grace: a place in which to rest our weary souls, something to rely on when all else has failed us. What we name as Holy may be in Scripture or in the woods, hidden in poetry or a painting, music or prayer. It matters not what we call it but we do seek it, that something that will take us from shadow into light, from the cold into the warmth and from pain into joy.

“In the night of weariness,” wrote Rabindranath Tagore, “let me give myself up to sleep without struggle, resting my trust upon thee.” Trust in the Holy that is what he suggests for our times of despair when we are cast into shadow, but what happens when we feel it is God who is causing the pain?

There may be many of you who don't believe that the Holy is all that active in determining your life's course or guiding you this way and that. Some of you on the other hand do believe that God is an active and integral part of your life and influencing the direction it takes.

Regardless of in what way you name and understand the Holy, let us stay, for a moment, with the image of being held in God's hand while God is clapping. I have to admit when I first heard it I burst out laughing loving the humor of it until the irony of the image hit just a few moments later. Like many good jokes, humorous retorts or witticisms, there is a grain of truth in it. That while we may believe all things are Holy and Sacred, our lives are also full of pain and suffering. For me there was a moment that followed the laughter in which I thought, “Oh man! That's exactly how it feels sometimes.” And then it wasn't so funny anymore.

What does this image of God clapping while we, humanity & all of creation, are in his, her, its hand leave us with? What is the nature of such a deity? What does it say about us that we may find some truth in that statement? Even if you don't believe in God as a being or entity, are there not times in your life where it feels as though everything is going wrong no matter how hard you try to keep things together? Whether we think of it as God or the Universe or just life, what does it mean that while we know life to be filled with sacred and beautiful things that at the same time there is destruction, hatred and despair?

The contradictory image of being held by a caring God with the violent image of being essentially smacked about by the same hand that holds you is powerful. It leads one to ponder - do all those who offer care also cause pain? Is the one thing in the world for many people that is supposed to offer comfort and unconditional love also the thing turning your life upside down?

A. Powell Davies wrote, "Life itself ...is a thing of contradictions. It is so in many ways. A great joy can clutch the heart like a great pain...In thought they contradict each other; in experience, they include each other." We cannot have one without the other he contends. But I am still left with the question of where is God, the Holy, the Spirit of Life in all that contradiction?

The Rev. Bill Schulz, a Unitarian Universalist minister and former UUA president, spoke during ministry days held just prior to General Assembly this past June. He has recently ended his 11-year tenure as the Executive Director for Amnesty International USA. In his speech to the gathered ministers he discussed the lessons he takes away from his time with Amnesty and the work he has done with torture survivors.

He stated in opposition to Sally McFague's (a feminist eco-theologian) belief that "there is no place where God is not," "...I would submit that no God worthy of the name is present in a torture chamber." He continues, "I have rarely, if ever, come across a testimony that it was faith in God that saw them [torture survivors] through the night."

It has been just over a week since the morning when Charles Roberts walked into a small one-room schoolhouse and barricaded himself in with 10 Amish schoolgirls. Within only a few days five of the girls and Roberts would all be dead and five other girls still remain recovering from the wounds inflicted by the gunshots.

The fighting in Darfur continues to rage on and the death toll climbs daily. Afghanistan has fallen into chaos and Iraq has yet to have seen a day without violence. It does seem as though if there is a God, God is either shaking the world like a magic eight ball, applauding in the midst of an standing ovation, or is present in very few places if Bill Schulz is correct.

I believe, however, that Bill Schulz is wrong. If the Holy, if sacredness, is not where the worst of human nature exists, what is the purpose of God? If the Holy is not present to the moments of our greatest cruelty and suffering then that leaves God only in our moments of joy and celebration and that is not the God I know. It is my firm and unshakable belief that what I know to be the Holy is present to us, in our lives, no matter the circumstances we find ourselves in. Just because some may not feel the presence of their god explicitly in times of terror and agony does not then mean that the Holy is absent. We may not see the stars in the night sky through the thick cloud cover, but they are there nonetheless. In fact, I believe that the Spirit of Life is present to us equally in our times of pain as in our times of delight. If you believe the natural world to be where

the Holy exists then that world does not disappear simply because you cannot see it or experience it in a given moment. If you believe that it is our connections to other human beings that sustains you, your faith in those connections may be shaken when you find yourself in the shadows, but that does not eliminate those connections altogether simply because you cannot feel them.

Davies argues that even in our deepest pain and suffering we are, in fact, not fully alone. “We may as well say it boldly; and in spite of all we have said before.” Concludes Davies, “The soul in its loneliness is never quite alone. There is always a sense of presence greater than itself. The soul in its loneliness is never quite alone. That is why – the only possible reason why – it is never altogether desolate, never quite empty, never entirely deserted, or without resource. That is why, in the wilderness [or the shadows] of our lives, the soul can grow; there is a nurture in the wilderness which its own vacant bleakness could never have supplied. From this, the soul renews its strength and finds its increase, moving not towards the abandoned and forsaken, but towards a closer kinship with that to which by natural essence it belongs.” The soul, your soul, in your loneliness and suffering is never quite alone.