

Sermon

Good morning, again, gentle people

Today, I think that I want to talk about what happens when we die

Most of you know that my father died April this year

His life was ended by a disease he got being in downtown Manhattan

During the hours following the fall of the twin towers

His lungs were injured by the building materials

He was in his 70's, but besides his lungs

His doctors told him he was in perfect health

He would have lived for years still without this specific disease

And recently, I went back to Colebrook CN

To the small town where my ancestors ran the family store and post office

And on October 20th we did my father's memorial

In the small congregational church

That has been at the town center

Across the street from his house

For generations.

Besides my own losses this year

There have been painful losses

In this community,

There are those among us who are also in deep grief

There have also been horrible losses in the larger world

And I know that many of you gentle people

Feel those losses deeply as well

There has just been a lot of death this year

Horrible losses, felt by many

And I find myself wondering, maybe even longing to know

Where do our beloved dead go

When they are no longer here, with us?

When I visit with people in the hospital

As their loved ones are dying

I learn that those who have strong beliefs

About the afterlife

Also seem to find a strong sense of comfort

In their beliefs.

About where their loved one has gone

Unfortunately, I cannot share the same certainty

And so I find that in the time following a loss

When I am missing the person I loved

I am still trying to figure out

How do I relate to them? Where do I locate them?

Now that they are not exactly "here" any more?

But still, they **are** with me, somehow.

I mean, I can still feel them

Maybe the feeling is an ache, but its there

They are still with me.

I just can't find them quite as easily any more

Preparing this sermon

I realized that I want to recognize the hurt we have all felt

The pain of our individual losses

The compassion we feel when those we love in community with us

Have a horrible loss

The hurt we feel looking at the suffering of others in the public eye

This morning, in the face of those losses

These losses

I find that I want to uplift you, to comfort you

To say the right things

Touch your hearts

Maybe inspire you

Certainly, I long to offer comfort

Some restoration

In the midst of what I imagine

Could be an exhaustion of loss.

I know that between my own losses

And the losses of those I know and love

Let alone the losses I read about every day

I feel an exhaustion

And I want to say words that will comfort

If you share that feeling.

I have to be honest this morning
I do not know if I know how to do that

So I thought maybe
If I told you what I long to do
Maybe that will help me do it
At least, it seems worth a try

I do welcome you to share with me afterwards how that turned out for you

This past week, after the horrible shooting
At Tree of Life Synagogue October 27 during morning services
I went to a vigil at Congregation Kol Ami
I went with something of a heavy heart
Not just over the loss itself
But because I had been so focused and embedded
In my own story
At first, I did not see the news

It was only when a Jewish hospital colleague
Asked me to attend a vigil, that I realized I had missed something very important

After my coworker asked me if I would go to this vigil for the shooting
I left that conversation and had to go look up the news for the details
Then, once I read them,

I had to return to apologize for not having felt the events
As deeply, or intently, as I thought I should have

Sometimes, I think our lives are like that
We just get so full of our own struggles
We have limited room for more

Logotherapy Psychologist Victor Frankl
The WWII survivor of many hours of suffering
Is quoted as saying "Suffering fills the vessel completely"

And I know, that is how I felt,
After presiding over my own father's memorial
I felt so full of my own suffering
That I missed bearing witness
To a deeply painful and important event

I admit to some horror
When I realize that every day in this world
Atrocities happen so often
That it feels like if I look away for even a moment
I might fail to bear witness to some important human suffering.

I find that horrifying...and exhausting

There is a question I think I have to ask too

How much can I take?
At what point does watching human suffering
Become more than I can bear?
And how do I take care of myself
When I don't want to look away?
Especially when I must carry my own losses
That fill my vessel?
How do I make room for more
When I want to?

These are important questions.
They are important to me this year
Important because of my own personal burdens
And I think, maybe, they are important questions
To others In this community too,
I wonder if maybe others are struggling
With a full vessel

So there I was at Congregation Kol Ami
Going because a colleague at work
Had let me know that the vigil was important to them
And I felt a need to engage, support, and share

When I arrived I found what looked like a few hundred people
Come to show support
To share in communal suffering

As I walked up, I saw other clergy there

I recognized our own Rev. Bob Lavalee

The UU ministers from First Church, Rev Tom Goldsmith and Rev. Monica Dobbins

Were there.

I listened to wisewords

From the new Rabbi at Congregation Kol Ami

Rabbi Samuel Spector

Rabbi Spector said, among other wise things

Something to the effect of...or at least this is how I heard it...

My memory is far from perfect

Rabbi Spector said

That the people of the Jewish faith do not have details about what happens after we die.

He said their faith is ambiguous about such ideas.

But what they do have is a clear idea of the world to come

A clear image of a promise for a better world

A world with more justice, compassion and love

So we hold onto those we loved and have lost

In relation to that world to come

We mourn them, grieve the loss

And we express value in their sacrifices

By continuing to work towards that world

At least, that was most of what I heard of his words

And in thinking about this sermon

Reflecting on love and loss

Something about those words has been

Rumbling around inside of me

Something about being in that shared space

Listening to those shared words

Touched me in a way that shifted my own vessel for suffering

And I walked away feeling differently

Though I am not sure I understand fully what happened

And I thought maybe I would look more deeply

In traditions of mourning in the Jewish faith

The Jewish people are a people

Who have had to learn to bear the burdens

Of their own individual losses

While also facing unimaginable communal loss

And they have several thousand years of practice

The Jewish communal sense of loss stretches back

Into the early history of civilization

So I thought I could maybe learn something

From these resilient, and hopeful, people

In the Jewish tradition, there is a structured method of mourning

A longer heritage that has helped teach Jewish people

What they may **need** when they need to mourn

Here I recognize perhaps a moment of irony

It may seem strange to Unitarian Universalists

To have such structured tradition

Passed down generation to generation

When we are a people who out of our own losses

At times must spend a lot of energy and focus

Figuring out how to leave behind the traditions

Of our past...

Still maybe we can learn something by listening

To long-standing traditions in the history of humanity

And let me share something about ritual

Human beings have relied on ritual since our earliest communities

As a way of sharing meaning, finding a place for things are important

The Anthropological, Sociological, and Psychological research

Is very clear

It **all** says that when we share meaning through ritual

Something important happens to us

Theologian, spiritualist and Franciscan, Richard Rohr has said

A redemptive thing we can do for another is listen to understand while being fully present with that person.

When we feel heard, understood and cared-for, it's surprising how our problems, seem to fade.

If we feel that someone is sharing our burden with us, walking with us, for some remarkable reason, our suffering is diminished...

(Adapted From Job and the Mystery of Suffering by Richard Rohr)

I think in a way shared ritual is similar to what Richard Rohr talks about

When we share ritual, something happens

That is similar to what happens when we feel heard

Somehow, in a mysterious way

We feel that those with whom we shared ritual

Are also somehow sharing our burdens

Which in some semi-magical way,

Appears to diminish both our collective and individual suffering

When I looked into Jewish mourning traditions

[\(https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/timeline-of-jewish-mourning/\)](https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/timeline-of-jewish-mourning/)

I found several understandings of the way we mourn

The way loss affects us

That I want to share with you

Again, let me ask a favor

Those of you here

Who's enunciation of Hebrew may be better than mine

Please lend a hand after the service

And feel free to correct my enunciation

The first period of mourning understood in the Jewish tradition is

>> Aninut

Aninut is an intense mourning,
When a mourner can focus on nothing else
So is excused even from observances of faith
During Aninut a mourner is not expected to be ok
And in fact, this first period of mourning lasts until the burial is complete
In the Jewish tradition, it is expected that those who are mourning
Will not be able to focus on anything else, at all,
Until their beloved is laid to rest
Until they are buried.

Interesting, that I notice now
My family has still not able to bury my father yet
He is with Temple Medical being autopsied and studied
At his request, we donated his body
So we will not have his ashes until a year is up

Plus, we did his memorial more than 6 months after he died
Now that I read these mourning traditions
And think about it
I realize that for the most part
Nobody in my immediate family
Has been able to talk about anything BUT his memorial
For I think the whole 6 months

There may have been some wisdom
In understanding that until some sort of ritual
Provides closure, mourners will struggle.

The next period of mourning in the Jewish tradition is called “Shiva”
Shiva is the period that follows a burial or memorial
It is expected to last 7 days
During this time the mourners are treated gently
Their community meets their immediate needs
Friends or family brings food
To help support the mourners
And to help ensure they do not mourn in isolation
At the end of Shiva friends and family
Will sometimes accompany mourners on a brief walk
Even just around the block
To mark their return into the larger world

This tradition of Shiva also speaks to me
I think it helps to recognize some formal boundary
Around the time immediately following a loss
Maybe it even helps to have defined roles for friends and family
Such as bringing food, helping with chores
Maybe that helps to avoid those awkward moments
That happen when we ask someone in deep grief
“What do you need” when we all realize from our own losses
That when we ourselves are in deep grief

We often have no idea what we want or need...

Reflecting about the time that Shiva represents

I think is part of what has granted me some forgiveness

For the times where, in my grief, I have struggled to remain engaged

Because here is a tradition that is thousands of years old

That makes clear, "Hey, people who are grieving need some space, man..."

There are two other traditions in Jewish mourning I want to share with you

For your reflection

>> Sheloshim

is a recognition that returning to the world from grief

Is not an "on" switch - we don't decide to get better then return to the world

And everything goes fine

Sheloshim is generally expected to last 30 days after Shiva

And is in place to remind the community

That the mourner has not yet fully returned to the world

Though they may be around

They are not fully restored

I think Sheloshim is where I have resided now for months

Since my father's death

There have been times where I feel like I am ok with being back in the world

And then times when I am surprised to find I am not

For example, I knew that 9/11 was the date

That killed my father

But when 9/11 rolled around this year

I was not prepared for the intense impact the date would have on me

The day after 9/11 I found myself simply unable to function

Overcome with emotion, unable to do more than to curl up in a ball

And cry...it was the hardest time I have had emotionally since his death

Including the minutes I spent by his body helping to clean him after death

It was not until I actually

Named the phrase "9/11 killed my father"

While crying at home, taking a sick day from work

That I was able to process my powerful feelings

And return to the larger world

Maybe a formal period of being incompletely returned to the world

Would have provided me with space for what I felt

Instead of finding me blind-sided by it

The Jewish tradition also recognizes

Yahrzit - the anniversary of death

Which I guess in my case

Can be an anniversary connected to the death

Because certainly the date of 9/11 provided to have impact on me

The way returning to a date when a loss happened

Can impact so many

In the Jewish tradition

Even after the formal mourning times

Of Shiva, and Sheloshim

If they have lost someone very close to them

A mourner may say special prayers

Every day...for the next year

To help ritualize their memory of their beloved.

Why do you think rituals and structure like these

Help us contain our mourning, our suffering?

Let me share a poem with you

The Guest House

By Rumi, translated by Coleman Barks

This being human is a guest house.

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 are 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.

The dark thought, the shame, the malice.
meet them at the door laughing and invite them in.

Be grateful for whatever comes.
because each has been sent
as a guide from beyond.

— Jellaludin Rumi, translation by Coleman Barks

I often share something of this poem with patients and families

When they appear afraid, or sad
But seem to be holding that feeling at bay
<Put your arm up John>

In the moments following my father's memorial
I had many family friends gathered around
And I remember one of them saying "We just have to stay positive"
When talking about aging, death and loss
And so I put my hand up like this
[I admit I think this is pretty clever...]

I slowly talked about Rumi's poem
Shared what few lines I could remember at the time
And I asked the question
What if the feeling, knocking at the door of your house
Isn't a "positive" feeling - what if it is sorrow, or fear, or sadness?
Knocking

<Look up at hand>
How much energy are you spending?
Trying to keep the door closed?

I think mourning ritual makes space like that
It helps us make space for the feelings
That need to come in
Rather than the ones

We wish would come in.

When I left that vigil at Kol Ami

I had shed a tear or two

I had made space for my anger, my helplessness, my sadness

And I think I felt a little bit of the way that ritual

Can change our suffering

Even though I was there to bear witness

To the suffering of another community

Of work colleagues

Of a people of faith and hope that I admire

Something in me changed personally

And my own insular suffering

Moved - it shifted somehow

When I walked away, it felt somehow lighter

I guess for me, I was ready for that shift to happen

And I think that is another reason

that mourning traditions like Judaism are worth learning from

Because the way they tell us to set time and space aside to mourn

remind us that mourning happens when we need

And that coming out of it happens only when we are ready

Sometimes

Given the wisdom learned from Judaism

And Rumi

It is maybe better to not do things the way we want

Maybe there are times when we have to do them the way we need

I think too that traditional mourning practices

Help us to remember that it is ok

For someone to not be ok

I started this sermon

Saying that I wanted to talk about where we go

When we die

And I guess that is not exactly what I talked about is it?

Though the theme was interconnected

For those beliefs about the after-life

And a source of comfort to the living

Just as the mourning traditions

Help us share suffering, and through that

Provide comfort

In the Jewish tradition

There is not a specific understanding of what happens in the after-life

Not exactly

there is a belief that there must be something

And that creation loves us

But an understanding that what is beyond

Is probably beyond...

As I think about this

I wonder if the deep, rich traditions of mourning

Make a space for suffering

And in doing so

Focus the loss on mourning

So that a definitive answer about the after-life

Isn't so necessary

I don't know

I do know that my sorrow needs space

Whether it is in connection to the loss of my father

In connection to painful and horrible loss of someone else

Or in the horror of watching hate and suffering over the whole world

My own sorrow needs sacred space

And I am not sure that it matters

Whether I find that space through

Belief in the great beyond

Or through practices shared with others here

So long as I find the space.

Closing Words