



### Message

When Unitarian Universalist seminarian Fredric Muir worked at an after school program at a church in the Bronx, he quickly learned to expect the unexpected. The kids who came to that program had seen more in life than many adults and their reactions to seemingly simple situations often asked for a quick and steady response. So when he heard shouts of shock and alarm coming from outside, you better believe he ran. When he got there, he saw, to his relief, that the kids were standing around a very dead rat.

"Well," he said, "I guess we better get a trash bag."

"A trash bag!" someone said. "We can't bury it in a trash bag!"

It was clear these kids wouldn't consider for a minute throwing that rat in the garbage. They were determined to do a full funeral. A shoe box was found and soft stuffing for inside the box. While some prepared a burial spot, others looked for anything that would make the ceremony more special. Others spread the news and neighborhood kids began to assemble at the church. Surrounded by twenty-five kids, many of whom were determined to be pallbearers, Fredric did a little ceremony and the rat was buried.

What did he learn from this? To use his words, "[This funeral] held all the pieces you'd find and experience with the death of any person. Shock and alarm, denial and celebration, notification of friends and family, planning and preparation, people who want to do nothing and people who want to do everything, the disruption of everyday routines, indecision and spontaneity, and more. It was all there!" (*Heretics' Faith*, 50-51).

Who among us has not experienced loss? Loss is a permanent feature of life and not one of us, no matter how young or how old, has escaped that reality. Perhaps you can count your losses on one hand. Perhaps you lost count years ago, but our losses are important markers in our lives. How we move through loss will have a great impact on who we become and how we greet both the losses and the opportunities which have not yet come our way.

When I was seminary, I took a class which focused on grief and loss, and our professor had each of us create our own loss history. We took a sheet of paper and drew a line lengthwise across the middle, at one end was the date of our birth, at the other our current age. We were then asked to plot on that timeline some of the significant losses of our lives and then to look carefully at how that had shaped who we became as people. The losses people included were sometimes tender, sometimes bittersweet, sometimes heartbreaking. The death of a parent. A best friend moving away. A brother or sister, son or daughter leaving home. Being the one leaving home. The death of a child. The loss of a job. Bankruptcy. A loved one's addiction. Divorce. Aging. The death of a spouse. Moving. A falling out with a loved one. The death of a sibling. Giving up a child for adoption. A miscarriage. The death of a friend.

As the room filled with the stories of our losses, many things became clear. First, each loss had been the beginning of a new way of life, even though it hadn't felt like it at the time. Loss and growth and change were part of the same process.

Second, like those kids in the Bronx, each of us had our particular way of dealing with the loss. Some of us got very busy. Some of us entered into solitude. Some of us held in our feelings. Others were much more vocal about them. Clearly, there was no one way to grieve. There wasn't even a clear timeline. Some people still grieved losses decades old. Others had moved on from losses much more recent. We all had to do it our own way.

And thirdly, it had been important to acknowledge the loss, whether that involved simply a moment of silence, time with family and friends, symbolic rituals like a funeral or memorial, or an exercise like the loss history we had just done. For many in the class, just creating the loss history was a powerful experience.

Acknowledging loss is a universal human need, that need to say, "This is what I have lost, and this is how that loss has changed me." Whether you are saying it to yourself or your god or someone you trust, something really important happens when we acknowledge our losses. It helps us to remain connected with what was lost and to change the nature of the connection in a way that allows us to move on.

The truth of the matter is, part of our sense of identity comes from the way we see ourselves when we're with others. The people who are closest to us, whether that be family or friends, just by being who they are, hold up a mirror, helping us to see



ourselves in a new way, a way that we might not have been able to see with our own eyes. Let me give you an example. A dear friend of mine had been single for a long time. She had always been an impatient person, someone who had a hard time allowing things to happen at their own pace. Then she met someone who lived a very different way. That person was much more pragmatic, thoughtful, and made decisions slowly. My friend was attracted to these qualities and as their relationship grew, she began to learn to slow down and she associated her new partner with her own life becoming less frantic and more solid. Unfortunately, that relationship ended, and she feared that she would lose her newfound ability to live more intentionally. She had so identified that stability with her partner, she didn't know if she could do it on her own. So she was really at a crossroads. Her grieving brought her to a special place, much as it didn't feel very special at the time. Walking into her new life meant letting go of her partner while holding on to the ways that that relationship had made her stronger. She now got to carry that strength in herself, rather than depend on it in other person.

Whenever we lose someone, whether through death or another kind of separation, this is what we go through. We have lost not only the person, but the way we saw ourselves with them. Therefore, when we lose that person, we may feel like we are losing part of ourselves, that part that came alive with that person who is now gone. The challenge of grieving is to take those things that were most precious, and put them back into ourselves in a new way. It will never be the way it was before. That is gone. But we can take those gifts and live with them in a new way. That's the door that opens when we grieve. You are incorporating what you experienced with that person into your life in a new way. They are now carried in you, becoming part of you and living on in you.

Now I want to say a few words about more complicated forms of grieving. If there has been abuse or some unresolved matter, the path to grieving is much slower. It may be difficult to see the things that were good about that person. It may be difficult to see what was good about you were when you were with them. Grieving becomes the task of moving through that complicated unfinished business - the anger, the bitterness, the disappointments, the self-recrimination, the reconciliation that never happened. You may be called to the task of forgiveness, either for the other person or yourself. If you find yourself in this kind of grief, you may need help that is beyond what you can do on your own. There are people who are trained to help you walk through complicated grief, and I would urge you to get the help you need so that doors can open for you and so that you can find new life in the best way you can.

What losses are you carrying? How have they changed your life? How have you become stronger? How have you become more human for having experienced the losses that have come to you?

This chapel is going through a loss. I don't think it is loss that has to become a complicated grief, but it is a loss nonetheless. Emerson Chapel has grown from a small church of less than 70, to a church of more than 90, within the last six years. That growth started when Emerson decided to build this new sanctuary. Now you might wonder, what kind of loss is that? Well, with growth comes loss. You can't move forward without letting go of some of who you are. There have been some losses. Loss of a certain kind of intimacy, where everyone knows everyone and knows everything that is happening in the church. The kind of intimacy that happens when your worship takes place in what used to be a living room. That kind of intimacy isn't possible anymore. We are finding a new way to be that intimate kind and loving church that we know this place to be.

The task before many of you, who were part of that earlier time, is to look back at the church that used to be, before this sanctuary was built. What was so special about that place? And how are you going to live that specialness now? Being able to do that may, for some of you, involve some grieving. You may still be missing how things were before all these changes happened. You may be wondering, what is my place here now. So many things have changed and I'm not sure where I fit. What is that deep thing that you loved then, and how are you going to live that now? It's not possible to go back, and that is something to grieve because there have been real losses. But we now face greater possibilities because of the sacrifices you made to get here. How are you going to go forward from here? What doors are opening as the one behind you closes?

Most importantly, how are you going to share that deep special thing with those who are making this their spiritual home now? How are you going to pass on the legacy so that what you so love about this faith and community lives on?

The task of grieving is to bring us back to an openness to life, to an openness for possibilities for our lives. We all carry legacies, the legacies of those who loved us the best they could, and now it's up to us. How are we going to pass on that



**"Carrying on the Legacy"**

Rev. Krista Taves

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Emerson UU Chapel, Ellisville MO

legacy? How are we going to manifest in this world the bounty that has been bestowed upon us by generations upon generations of women and men?

In a moment, we are going to begin the time when we name those who have passed on. You will find slips of paper in your orders of service, and you are welcome to write down any names that you want read in this service. Let this be a time to acknowledge your losses, to hold up the legacies that you carry with you, and to remind ourselves of how blessed we have been by those who are no longer with us. As the music begins we will pass around the baskets to collect the names. If you brought flowers to honor a loved one, you are also welcome to bring those forward at any time. Let us begin.