



**Story** – "Senjo and Her Soul Are Separated" from the book *Zen Ghosts* by Jon J. Muth

## **Homily**

Some years ago I had a friend who struggled every time he had to make a significant choice because he could hardly deal with the reality that making a choice meant saying yes to one possibility and no to another. He could imagine so vividly the possibilities of each option that he could barely stand the thought of what experiences he might be giving up if he made the wrong choice. He would already be grieving the loss of those possible experiences. Was he going to lose this experience or that experience? How could he know for sure that he was making the right choice, the one that could make him happiest and most fulfilled?

Now I will grant, there are times in our lives when we don't have to choose, when there isn't an either/or in front of us, but rather a both/and, and he thrived in that possibility and was a master of turning either/or situations into both/ands. It was quite amazing.

But there are always times that it is not reality. When one becomes a parent, you cannot hold onto the life you had before parenthood, it is a point of no return. Sure you can have weekly date nights and time outs with the friends, but nothing can be the same because you can't be at the center of your life anymore, at least not for those early years. Many new parents understandably grieve the life of freedom and independence they had before becoming a parent, even as they celebrate and treasure what becomes possible in becoming a parent. But these kind of realities that most frustrated him. He hated points of no return and actively feared and grieved the potential of lost and unavailable opportunities. What this meant is that he lived in many imagined worlds of loss, worlds of possibilities that never came to pass, that it became difficult for him to truly live in the possibilities of the present.

In our children's story today, Senjo is faced with a point of no return. Her father's decision has broken her innocence and thrust her in a place of loss. In her pain she splits into two – the woman who is broken because the man she loved is gone, and the woman who follows him and begins a new life. I wonder if the truth of the story is that she could not make a choice between broken-heartedness and staying with her family, and following Ochu and losing her family. There is loss either way. And rather than lose both, she became two people living in the reality of two choices. But in truth, just like my friend, she was fully in neither reality. In the one she misses her family terribly, in the other she grieves Ochu.

This story is about what often happens to our spirits when we are faced with significant loss. Whether that be the death of a loved one, the end of a relationship, the end of a significant phase of life, a life changing illness, even a child growing up and leaving home – whatever our loss - we have faced a point of no return. We can never be the same. The story of Senjo is a metaphor for what can happen to our spirits in those times. That point of no return not only splits us off from the person we were before the loss, we can also split into the multiple possibilities of who we experience ourselves to be within the loss. (pause)

Let's look at one example of a particular kind of loss to explore these splittings that can happen. When a relationship ends, and they end in all kinds of ways – separation, divorce, death - what is it that we are grieving? Well obviously we grieve the person we have lost. But we're also grieving the hopes we had in terms of what we could have been together.

My partner and I, for instance, are planning for our retirement needs, so we spend time focusing on what we want for ourselves when we retire - a paid off home, an RV, money for travelling, and resources for when we are going to need more care than we can give each other. Should something happen to either of us before that time, whoever is left will grieve that the plans we are making today never got to become real. When a relationship ends, whether through separation, divorce or death, you not only grieve what was, but also what you dreamed could be, the experiences you expected to share that are not going to happen. This is just as true of relationships that were difficult. In fact, it may be even more true. When the person you lost disappointed you, you're also going to grieve your disappointments, the loss of trust, the loss of relationship with that person, and perhaps all the ways you protected yourself from letting that person hurt you again.

To use the metaphor of our children's story, when we grieve we can experience ourselves as a soul separated into the many possibilities hoped for and lost. This is true whether the person you have lost is a life partner, a dear friend, a sibling, a parent, a grandparent, or anyone who had a significant place in your life. This kind of grieving is such an important process to go through because it is honoring all the hopes and the disappointments, and there is no rule about how long this should take. It could take six months, or years. The point of the grieving process is not to run from this separating of souls but to welcome it into your life and to be ready to grow and learn from it.

But, we're not meant to stay there for always or like my friend, we belong to those things we have lost, whether real or imagined, and we cannot truly live in the present moment and treasure what is. When Senjo turned to her husband and said she longed to see her parents and to be home again, she was stating her readiness for the separated parts of her soul to come together again.

One of the reasons we started the tradition of having an annual grief and loss service, is because it is so important to have times to honor that many of us are in a grieving process. Some of you may be anticipating a loss that is coming your way and wondering how you will be once that loss actually happens. Some of you are in grief that is new and raw. Others are in a place where it doesn't hurt so much anymore, but there will be moments when it comes back. For some of you, thinking of one you have lost now brings you into a place of tender remembering. You have come through it and are in a place of inner reconciliation. Your separate selves have come back into one.

Once a year we offer ourselves a ritual to honor those we have loved and lost, and to honor where we are in the journey of soul separation and reconciliation. So let us enter into a time of silence, remembering those we have lost, remembering the people we became with them and the people we hoped to become with them, and who we have grown into without them. Let us begin.

(Krista sits – one minute of silence)

Mary – Death and life are constant states of becoming. We are sacred in our living and we are sacred in our dying. Let us honor those who have passed through their time on this earth by naming them. In your orders of service you will find a slip of white paper. I would invite you at this time to write the names of ones you would like to honor this morning. The ushers are waiting with baskets. When you are ready please let them know and they will come to you. In a few minutes, we will begin.

(reading of names)

Please join me in prayer as you are willing and able.

Oh sacred cycle of life and death, into this community of love and fellowship, may we bring our hopes and dreams, realized and lost. For those in places of fresh grief, may they wait in faith, trusting that this time of emptying will come to an end and that they will emerge from it renewed and strengthened. As we call to the spirits of our loved ones, may we bring together what has been separated. For all that we are and wish to be, may it emerge in the service of peace, love and eternal hope. Amen and Blessed Be.