

**“GOOD GRIEF”**  
**a sermon by Rev. Preston Moore**  
**Williamsburg Unitarian Universalists**  
**Williamsburg, VA**  
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Randy Pausch is a professor at Carnegie-Mellon University. His specialty is videography, and he is a consultant to Disney in that field. Last September, he gave a talk as part of the university’s “Last Lecture” series, in which professors are asked to share whatever wisdom they would offer the world if they knew this lecture would be their last. In Pausch’s case, the “last chance” assumption was not just an interesting hypothetical. A month before his lecture, he had received a diagnosis of terminal cancer and been told he had only months to live.

In his lecture, which millions have now watched on the internet, one moment stuck out for me. He talked about his father, who served as a medic in World War II, at the Battle of the Bulge. After his father died, his mother discovered among his father’s things an Army Bronze Star Medal for Valor -- one of the highest military medals, given for courage under fire. In their fifty years of marriage, he had never told her about it – nor, apparently, about the conditions under which he earned it, which must have been unspeakably traumatic.

Pausch called this a lesson about humility. But to my ears, it was a heartbreaking lesson about the challenge of grieving. What carnage did Randy Pausch’s father witness, winning his medal for valor in the bloodiest battle in all of World War II, which left over 30,000 soldiers dead and over 80,000 wounded? To what grief did he come? What piece of himself did he leave there, among all the other fatalities? What was the cost – to himself and those around him – from this unmourned burial of the spiritual losses he suffered?

Grief is more than just an intense form of pain. It is the emotion triggered by severe loss -- a loss of a part of the self – the part that has many names, but let’s just call it ego. Ego makes meaning in life by defining itself in relation to its surroundings. Some of those surroundings – such as a spouse, a parent, a child, a longtime intimate friend – are so incredibly close that the ego experiences them as part of itself. When one of those critical parts is lost, the ego is shattered. Its job is to manage life, and it suddenly cannot do that job.

A grievous loss does not necessarily involve a loved one. It could be a calling, such as music, lost by a physical trauma that makes musicianship impossible. It could be something we think of as merely a backdrop in life, like the expectation that people and things around you will not be blown to bits. It could be something that just happens to you, like fate, shattering the bedrock expectation that things happen for a reason and life is fair. Or it could be a loss that flows from your own blindness to what is happening in your life. Like one of the losses Linda described for us this morning, that came from hurting someone close when a relationship comes crashing down.

What, then, is to be done with this shattering? Often, the ego’s immediate impulse is to do anything to shut off the pain. Because left to its own devices, without deeper sources of meaning, the ego trafficks mostly in seeking pleasure and comfort, and avoiding pain and

suffering. Our market economy has responded impressively to this impulse, with anesthesia and distractions of every description.

Many books about grieving counsel strongly against acting on this intense desire to turn away from the pain. They advise engaging with the grief and experiencing it fully as a healing process. This makes sense.

Engaging with the grief means inviting in the full awareness of how much you cared about what you have lost – instead of pushing it away. As Linda learned when her mother died earlier this year, no matter how much you appreciated whatever or whomever you have lost, grieving brings more gratitude for it. Along with that comes a heightened sense of gratitude for what remains with you of the person who is gone; and even further, a greater appreciation for all of life. Grieving also calls for separating out what must be held onto from what must be let go of. This brings a heightened ability to be present to life, rather than living in the past that has become “never again” or in the future that has become “never shall be.”

It’s hard to separate anything out, of course, if you’re standing in the dark. And that’s where grief puts you – in a dark cave with the winds of painful emotion howling in your ears. Part of the work of grieving is to learn to trust that you do actually have a kind of spiritual night vision. This brings an ability to treat the dark not as an enemy, but rather, as a place where something new and valuable can be cultivated.

The spiritual practice of grieving entails intentionally doing whatever will sharpen, rather than dull, the edges of loss. This practice is likely to include a mixture of solitude and companionship, particularly with people who have known grief. Companionship might also be found in poetic voices that can give words to your sorrow when your own words won’t come. Like those of May Sarton just read; or these by Tennyson in a poem called “A Farewell”: “But here will sigh thine alder tree, and here thine aspen shiver; and here by thee will hum the bee, forever and forever. A thousand suns will stream on thee, a thousand moons will quiver; but not by thee my steps shall be, for ever and for ever.” No more strolls by the river with that one who has departed. How sharp the sweetness of those strolls becomes.

Moving from grief to grieving calls for hard work at the very time when you have been laid low; but it can bring great rewards. It is tempting to think of the spiritual practice of grieving as basically a matter of pacing, of regaining one’s balance without trying to “bounce back” too soon. But after a grievous loss, things will never be like they were.

The results of the grieving process – a heightened capacity for gratitude, a sharper sense of presence to life, and the ability to see your way in spiritual darkness – represent a foundation on which a newly constituted ego can arise from the wreckage of the shattered one. This is the destiny toward which grieving shows the way.

This destiny is reachable because there is a part of the self, other than ego, that is not shattered by the loss being grieved. This part also goes by many names – heart, deep self, soul, among others. I call it soul, and in using that word I disclaim its associations in some religions with notions of heaven and hell or some other form of afterlife. It is the name I give to the inner

source of our longing for wholeness; our noble impulses toward generosity, love, and compassion; and our connection to what lies beyond the finite.

The overriding interest of the soul is wholeness – being a part of, rather than apart from, everything and everyone with which and with whom it belongs. In pursuit of ever-larger wholenesses, the soul seeks the largest possible life. No amount or intensity of life experience is too great for it, whether pleasurable or painful. The soul knows that each such experience will enlarge its capacity for even more life experience, leading to an ever-greater capacity for wholeness, generosity, love, and compassion.

The trouble is, the soul can only have these life-enlarging experiences with the cooperation of ego. It is the ego, not the soul, that knows how to put the car key in the ignition and go somewhere, how to relate to other people, and how to make meaning. And unlike the soul, ego lives within the limitations of the finite world. Ego gets tired, gets wounded, needs healing.

This trouble turns out not to be insurmountable, because enlargement of the soul actually is the source of what is called healing. When you think of a physical wound healing, you envision it disappearing, or leaving only a scar. Spiritual wounds don't work that way. They stay with you – often as valuable reminders of something you needed to learn. The shift called healing is simply that as the soul grows larger, the relative importance of any wound becomes smaller. As strange as it sounds, the growth of the soul can be dramatic enough to reduce greatly the severity of a wound that once felt larger than your whole self – like the loss of someone who was the light of your life.

After the loss of someone like that, the beginning this kind of healing can actually give rise to conflicted feelings. As the wound ceases to be immobilizing, “moving on” with life may feel like dishonoring the importance of the person who has died. But there can be no greater honoring of that person than to experience what she meant in your life in a way that creates a new and larger wholeness out of the loss. And no greater dishonoring than to make that person into a cap on how large your life can become. What would she herself say to this attitude of “it’s all downhill from here; my best years are behind me?” Can you imagine the person who has been so close to you, who loved you so much, saying “yes, please keep yourself small in my honor. Please leave off any further spiritual growth.”

Of course, there is always the option of turning away from grieving and the spiritual growth it brings; but never an option of turning back. After a grievous loss, either the soul and the ego will collaborate in a grieving process, and the self will get larger and larger; or the ego will turn away from the pain, and the self will get smaller and smaller. Unless there is a dramatic change of course, one pattern or the other is likely to repeat as life continues, and to be your bequest to those who outlive you.

Which brings me back to Randy Pausch and his Bronze Star-winning father. I don't know Randy personally. All I have to go on is his appearance on Oprah, the text of his last lecture, and a follow-on book he wrote about it. If he was grieving the loss of his bright future, with a wife and three children and a brilliant, fulfilling career, he didn't share it. With a hint of defiance, he told his audience he was sorry to disappoint anyone who expected him to be morose

and pitiful, as if grieving makes a person an object of pity. His verbal presentation was backgrounded by a cascade of sunlit visual images – photos of family, friends, childhood experiences, funny moments; but there were no images, verbal or visual, of him coming to know the night descending on his life. He described his book as being about living rather than dying. But pushing away death and loss makes the soul smaller, not larger. Death is not the opposite of life, but rather, of birth. The largest possible life is one that includes death, loss, and grief.

Randy Pausch’s story belongs to him. He can write it and share it any way he chooses. But watching him I felt a strong sense of missed opportunity. In his book, he wrote, “Under the ruse of giving an academic lecture, I was trying to put myself in a bottle that would one day wash up on the beach for my children.” What if, in his making of these written and videographic records, he had shared the shadow side of his experience, along with the sunlight? What gifts might this energetic, expressive person have given to his lecture audience and to his children -- when they are adults and ready to learn about matters of ultimate importance? Gifts that would outshine the best E-ticket ride Disney ever came up with – or even a Bronze Star for Valor, discovered among the personal effects of one who has departed?

Someone here must be asking herself, “if grieving is so darn valuable, sounds like we should be throwing ourselves in the path of grievous loss every chance we get. Is that what he’s saying?” The pat answer to that question is that we shouldn’t worry: life will take care of our need for opportunities to grieve without our going looking for them. But it’s not that simple. It’s more a matter of whether we will choose paths in life that we know will bring us face to face with big risks; whether we will choose the way of surprise instead of the way of certainty. Grieving is itself a form of spiritual risk-taking – the risk that turning toward all that pain might avail us nothing, because at the time of choosing to grieve, grief itself is so all-encompassing that we cannot see beyond it. We must begin the grieving anyway, in a condition of not knowing, not seeing clearly. Just trusting.

The potential reward for that risk-taking – potential, but not guaranteed – is an even greater capacity to take the risks in life that are all bound up with life’s greatest joys. Grieving readies us for risking a new relationship of intimate love after the devastating loss of the one we had; for pouring ourselves into pursuit of a new calling after the crumbling of an old one that gave our lives structure and meaning. It enables us to trust again.

The novelist Henry James once said that his definition of paradise was “a perfect automobile going thirty miles an hour on a smooth road to a twelfth-century cathedral.” My definition is so different. More like those Irish monks we talked about here two weeks ago, clambering into their small boats and heading off across uncharted seas. As paradoxical as it sounds, shipwreck and grieving are part of that paradise. They are the shore from which we once again can put out to sea, trusting in a spiritual destiny of ultimate goodness and fulfillment.

AMEN.