

## **“Loving What is Mortal”**

Sermon by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval  
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*The delivered sermon may have slight variations from this written manuscript. Audio recordings of sermons can be found online at <http://ucmvt.org/worship/sermons/>.*

Of all the journeys we are on as human beings, the one that all of us will at some point traverse is the journey of grief. Loss is inevitable. We lose relationships, homes, and people we have loved along the way. Just in this past church year within this community, there have been so many losses that we have experienced of those known within our church and within our personal lives.

Every journey of grief is as unique as each of us. There may be similarities in these journeys, but the contours, bumps, dips, and crests are different for each of us. Unlike a well-planned-for, itinerary-driven journey, the journey of grief has no clear destination and no clear end point. There is no clearly marked exit sign. Every day is an arrival and a departure. You arrive at a new way of being and depart from it not quite knowing where you'll land the next day.

Even with this unpredictability, grieving is an active, all-engaging process. Thomas Attig, author of the book, *How We Grieve*, describes the process of grieving as “relearning the world.” Relearning the world, he says, “is not a matter of learning information about the world but learning how to be and act in the world differently in the light of our loss.”<sup>1</sup>

As we journey through life, we construct a world of our physical surroundings, social relationships, and the spiritual meaning we ascribe to our surroundings and relationships that give our lives their own pattern and order. A loss can upturn and even shatter this order. In the process of grieving, Attig proposes, we learn again how to relate to our physical environment, to friends, family members, and co-workers, and to our own selves. We also relearn what it means to be spiritual beings, that is to find meaning as we live now in a transformed space and time and transformed relationships with others. This re-learning is not a finite or linear process. It is an ongoing process that requires the whole of ourselves.

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Attig, *How We Grieve: Relearning the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996) 107.

We become travelers on the journey of grief because of our deep capacity for love. This capacity to open our hearts wide in loving relationship with others.

Mary Oliver, a poet revered by many people especially in Unitarian Universalist circles, died on January 17th of this year. She wrote many poems that touched on love, loss and grief especially in the wake of the death of her longtime partner, Molly Malone Cook, who she lived with for many years in Provincetown, Massachusetts.

This is her poem, "In Blackwater Woods":

"Look, the trees  
are turning  
their own bodies  
into pillars

of light...

To live in this world  
you must be able  
to do three things:  
to love what is mortal;  
to hold it

against your bones knowing  
your own life depends on it;  
and, when the time comes to let it go,  
to let it go."<sup>2</sup>

Early last year, I began a new journey of grief that I did not anticipate. In mid-January, I discovered that I was pregnant. My spouse, Jared, and I had been talking for a while about whether we wanted to have a second child. We had complex feelings about this, acknowledging both the joys and the struggles that would come with having another child. I had mixed emotions in those early weeks of this unexpected pregnancy. Soon though, we both started to feel excited about the prospect of adding a child to our family.

Because of my age, I had an ultrasound at my very first doctor's appointment at about nine weeks of pregnancy. I could tell from the technician's face and the extra time she

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<sup>2</sup> Mary Oliver, "In Blackwater Woods," *American Primitive* (Boston/New York: Little, Brown & Co, 1983) 82.

took that something wasn't quite right. Lying in the semi-lit room, I just stared up at the painted ceiling panel trying to stay calm and to not let my mind wander too much.

Once I was back in the the doctor's office, she informed me of some surprising news. First of all, it appeared that there were two fetuses not just one, and the imaging didn't quite line up with what they would expect at nine weeks of pregnancy. The doctor suggested that I make an appointment to return in two weeks for another ultrasound.

The waiting was just excruciating. In that time, I began to prepare myself for the loss I could feel was coming. Psychologists refer to this as "anticipatory grief." Often, this kind of grief arises when someone we love is facing a terminal illness or a prognosis that gives them just a short amount of time left to live. I had a sense of anticipation, or perhaps just fear, that I would lose the pregnancy. I remember one meditation session on a quiet morning when the sorrow just erupted out of me, and I sobbed for a few minutes.

The next appointment in late March confirmed that the fetuses had not grown and were not viable. I talked through the options with the doctor and my spouse, and I scheduled a surgery to remove the miscarried pregnancy the next day.

I was completely anesthetized for the surgery, and I woke up in recovery with my husband by my side. As I awoke and realized the surgery was complete and I no longer had the beginnings of growing life inside me, I wept.

In the days that followed, my grief encased me. It was like a hard shell that wrapped itself around me. An armor that made it easy to ignore the depth of emotions underneath - the disappointment, sorrow, shame, relief, and confusion. I told myself that I had too many responsibilities to attend to and too many things to accomplish to let the armor down.

Of course, those defenses only held up for a short while. Eventually, I needed to let everything else go so that I could peek beneath the armor and see - Am I still me? Am I okay under here? What do I make of the world now? I needed to begin that process of relearning the world that Thomas Attig describes.

My grieving was complicated by the fact that although miscarriage is fairly common, with an estimated one in four pregnancies ending in miscarriage, it is still not a loss that many women talk openly about. It can also be hard to name what exactly was lost.

Saying I had lost a baby didn't feel quite right. Much of what I lost was intangible - a lost sense of possibility, a lost image of what my family might have become, lost hope for the child or children that I could have nurtured and watched grow from baby to child to adult. The idea that this pregnancy could have brought two babies into our family also complicated my grief as I wondered how in the world we would have managed that.

I was exploring many of these questions in my weekly therapy sessions, but I also needed more time and space to truly be on this journey with my whole heart. With the arrival of spring and the return of the healing sun, I felt that I could open myself more to my grief.

One weekend in April, I was preaching at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Fairhaven in Massachusetts, in the southern part of the state near New Bedford. My family had accompanied me, and after I preached that Sunday we took a trip to the ocean. It was way too cold to go in the water but just walking on the shore and sitting in the sand watching the waves and feeling the wind and the sun upon my skin were balm for my soul.

Mary Oliver writes in her poem entitled, "Ocean":

"I am in love with Ocean  
lifting her thousand white hats  
in the chop of the storm,  
or lying smooth and blue, the  
loveliest bed in the world.  
In the personal life, there is

always grief more than enough,  
a heart-load for each of us  
on the dusty road..."<sup>3</sup>

My grieving needed departure. It needed space from the routines of daily life. In July, we took a family road trip to the Gaspé Peninsula in Quebec Province. The St. Lawrence River is so wide and vast that it feels like the ocean, so much so that locals refer to it as La Mer or "the sea." Again, the waves and the wind and the sun softened my shield, my protective armor against encountering my grief.

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<sup>3</sup> Mary Oliver, "Ocean," *Red Bird* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2008) 15.

As many of you have experienced in your own lives, the journey of grieving can be unpredictable. We never know exactly what moment - an encounter with an old photograph, an old favorite song, a particular smell, a conversation - might bring up again the significance of our loss.

This was true for me back in August when I participated in a retreat with other Unitarian Universalist clergy. This retreat was focused on spiritual practices at the heart of prophetic ministry. One of the exercises we had to do was create a ritual. We were divided into small groups and each person in the group was in charge of designing and leading a ritual on one of five themes. One of my colleagues was assigned the task of creating a ritual about loss. Before going to this retreat, I had just learned of the death of UCM member Debi Cherington, who had died just a couple days after attempting to take her own life. Her death was heartbreaking for me as I know it was for many others, so I was in a pretty tender place.

My colleague who had created the ritual for loss invited each of us one by one to stand in the center of our circle. She invited us to name the loss that we were wishing to honor and what we wanted our colleagues to offer us in prayer. When it was my turn, I stepped inside the circle. I hadn't talked with many people about the miscarriage, and I could feel myself trembling and the tears coming as I named the loss of that pregnancy five months earlier. I can't remember exactly what I asked of my colleagues for their prayers, but I remember them placing their hands upon me, gently, on my shoulders and back for a few moments. I then held my hands palms up as my colleague poured water over them as she had with the others in the group as we sang, "Wash me away, so that all that's left is love, Great Spirit." And then I silently blessed each person in the group, placing my hands upon their head and looking each of them in the eyes with gratitude.

This ritual touched something deep inside me and allowed me to access once again those feelings and those questions that I too quickly had the urge to push aside. Coincidentally, my colleague who designed the ritual was also grieving a miscarriage which had just taken place two weeks prior.

For months afterwards, what I lost still felt complicated. It was difficult to name or to recognize the loss in a public way. As we were preparing our holiday cards to send out this past December, I realized that many of our close friends who live many miles away had no idea about this loss, nor the loss of our dear cat of ten years just a couple of months prior in September. I penned a short reflection on the year including the

sadness of these losses and included it on our holiday card. It felt like a turning point to be able to write out the words and to put them in envelopes, put stamps on them and know that they would be read by my loved ones and received with care and empathy.

I was learning to be in the world in a new way - still myself yet different.

I don't know that I let go, as Mary Oliver suggests, as much as I let in. I let in the waves of emotion as contradictory as they have been at times. I let in the questions and the grasping for new answers. I let in the deepening of relationship with my spouse and my son and the joy of our time together with a new significance in light of what we had all lost.

This, of course, is not the end of the story. The grieving process continues on. It is a journey without a defined end point.

Thomas Attig writes, "The concept that we must relearn the world as we grieve captures both the variety and the potentially all-encompassing scale of the tasks we face. When we grieve, we must relearn virtually every object, place, event, relationships with others, and aspects of ourselves that the lives of those who have died have touched. Our grieving takes as long as it does because there is so much we must relearn."<sup>4</sup>

I am still relearning the world and my place in it in light of this loss. Through the journey, there have been deep moments of sorrow and also moments of clarity and joy in newfound connections and meaning in my life.

The losses and the "heart-load" of grief that each of you carries have undoubtedly changed you. You have survived unimaginable losses of children, spouses, and friends. You have endured grief that piles up so that the weight feels almost unbearable. You have also carried on one day at a time, one moment at a time learning to be and to act in a world transformed by your losses. This is what it is to be human - a journey with tenderness and roughness, simplicity and complexity, tears and laughter.

As we each make our way on this journey of love and loss, we can find moments when something turns inside of us. When grace appears. When joy and praise feel surprisingly possible again.

I end with the words of Mary Oliver and her poem "I Will Try":

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<sup>4</sup> Attig, 122.

“I will try.  
I will step from the house to see what I see  
and hear and I will praise it...  
Be still. Listen!  
Is it red bird? Or something  
inside myself, singing?”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Mary Oliver, “I Will Try,” *Red Bird* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2008) 75.