

The Sum of All the Parts©

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Offered to the Unitarian Universalist Church of Annapolis

Sunday, November 17, 2019

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I didn't know the woman who lay on the autopsy table. Only her name, which was attached to a card on her big toe, gave me any clue that she had once lived. Who was she, I wondered, as I stood there, gowned from head to toe in protective garb? Had she been born in this town? Did she fall in love and get married? Had her large body borne children? Did she have faith? Did she know God? What had happened to her soul? And then, for that matter, what was I, the hospital chaplain, doing here, in this basement room of the hospital, with the hum of pop music, the smell of chemicals and the sound of trickling water in the background? Most of us in our right minds would not want to be standing where I was that day in late November, waiting for the autopsy to begin. Most of us don't even want to hear about such things, because facing the end of life is so painful—and so difficult, that we can barely bring ourselves to talk about it. Frankly, even the thought of writing about this experience made me nervous. After all, we want to come to church to feel inspired – to get the courage and strength for the living of these days – and writing about witnessing an autopsy – well, that just doesn't sound like a very cheery topic. But there's another reason why I was nervous about telling this story, but I was also nervous was because it's so personal.

What I want to tell you about today is not just about death, as important as that might be. It's also about my own experience of losing faith, and finding God one early winter's day in the autopsy suite with a woman I never knew - and never would.

The forensic pathologist told me that I could leave at any time, but if I thought I was going to pass out--would I please let someone know so that I don't hurt myself falling down? The woman in charge of the autopsy was instructing a resident on how to make the first incision into the body. Seeing the scalpel poised, I held my breath and said a prayer.

Throughout the course of my time at the hospital, I had become good at saying prayers with others--and even saying them to myself. But in recent months, my ability to pray with integrity had all but disappeared. I had begun to wonder if there was a God to pray with, or to, or about. It was a tremendous loss, especially for a person who makes her life's work engaged in a relationship with the ineffable.

This loss happened gradually, over time, over months of witnessing human struggle. Earlier that year, I met a woman my own age, whom had given up on life. She had been born with a heart defect, and had not been expected to live. Miraculously, she had lived well into her thirties, but always with the threat of death dangling over her head.

Finally, the stress of living with her own mortality made her decide to give up on life. "What's the point," she asked me one day. "I just don't see the purpose of my life any longer. I'd rather be dead." In fact, she had tried to take her own life several times. This time, and the reason she was in the hospital's psychiatric unit, was because she nearly succeeded.

I argued with her, pleaded with her, begged her, cried in front of her--not to give up on life--not to allow her fears to drive her to suicide. I wanted to instill in her a sense of hope—of meaning—of purpose for her life. I read her passages from the Bible and from other sacred texts to try to lift up her spirits--to help her reconnect with something deeper than her own pain. Nothing worked.

I began to realize that this young woman was dying of a broken heart. I had always believed that the phrase "broken heart" meant being disappointed in love, but in her case, it was a profound disappointment with life. After many visits, and after many conversations, my heart broke too. One day, after talking with her, I felt in every fiber of

my being, that she was right. Daily I had witnessed the bizarre, unexpected, always painful and often devastating effects on life on the body. Whether enduring grueling chemotherapy, or repairing the body after an accident, or giving birth to a still-born child, I saw and felt, maybe for the first time in my life, how full of pain and suffering life really is.

I saw how utterly random and unfair life was; whether caught by a stray bullet or felled by one misplaced gene – it appeared to me then that there was nothing but suffering in the works for all of us. And there, with a broken heart inside, and a broken heart in front of me, I lost God.

I always had a summery relationship with God. At that time, mine was a breezy faith – a rational faith – one that was not influenced by either fundamentalism or tragedy. But it was a relationship that I had counted on – taken for granted perhaps, my entire life. But on that certain day that fall, while sitting in the room of this young woman who had given up on life - there was nothing. No God. No Presence. No comforter, no guide, no helper, no soul, nothing. Absolutely nothing mattered. There was no meaning in anything--not my work, which until that time had been difficult, but enormously satisfying. My husband was wonderful, but if I were gone, he'd probably find someone else. My friends were scattered across the country and consumed with their own lives--and I didn't know if they cared. My clothes, house, car, books--everything that I had gathered around me with satisfaction and comfort seemed ultimately disposable and not worth keeping.

Other members of in the chaplain residency program I attended became alarmed. Once I was an active participant in discussions, now I just sat, with eyes downcast. Whatever issues they discussed with passion didn't touch me, or make any difference, because we were all going to die anyway—so what was the point of caring about anything? Any benevolence I had felt about the universe had disappeared in the stark reality of the fragility of our bodies and how that affects our spirit. It was a place devoid of meaning, depth, connection and hope.

Maybe you too, have been in a similar place. In Christian history and tradition, it's called the way of

the desert--that plane were everything flattens out into a landscape of emptiness. That is a place that is even beyond comfort or relief. There is no-thing. It is what St. John of the Cross calls the dark night of the soul. And for some, it more than just one dark night--it is a state of being that seems unrelenting in its flatness. The earth turns its face away from the sun--brilliant leaves fall into the soft, rich earth, stark trees bare their limbs like bones, and the joy of living seems hard to find.

With the incision made one of the first tasks was to remove the heart, nestled underneath its ribcage embrace. At rest--how small and seemingly insignificant the heart is compared to the other, larger organs. We call a person hard-hearted, which is impossible, but we do know that hardening of the arteries – which are, by nature, soft and flexible - can cause either dementia or demise.

We say "soft heart" or "stout-heart" or "heart-less"--all common phrases that remind us of just how important this small and vital organ is. A broken heart, however, will simply not work--whether by loss of love or loss of life.

Unitarian minister Ralph Waldo Emerson knew what it was like to live with a broken heart. His beloved, young wife, Ellen had died. Since her death, his life had unraveled. Professionally, he could no longer accept his ministerial role. He couldn't preach or teach or write. Love had died and his career was falling apart. For more than a year and two months he was in the habit of walking from Boston to her grave in Roxbury. Then, on March 29, 1832, he wrote in his journal, "I visited Ellen's tomb and opened the coffin." We don't know exactly what moved Emerson to do this, but we do know that he had a powerful craving for direct, personal unmediated experience. As grisly as this must have been for Emerson, it turned a corner for him. Shortly after that experience, he wrote a sermon entitled "The God of the Living." He would no longer live with the dead. "Let us express our astonishment," he wrote in his journal, "before we are swallowed up by the jaws of the abyss."

As I watched the various parts of the body being taken apart, weighed, analyzed, something began to shift inside of me. A thin vein of awe began to

course through me, and an episode from the 90's TV Show "Picket Fences" came to mind. In that show, Carter, the town's coroner and pathologist tells a young, squeamish doctor that she should think of the people in the morgue as "patients who have granted us a great privilege--to enter a cathedral where no one has set foot before. This is the place where death nurtures life."

Standing there, in the midst of the autopsy room--with the sound of water trickling and flesh being pulled away under the scalpel's exactness, as beads of perspiration crowned the young resident's forehead, I too, began to feel as if I were standing in a cathedral--a place of such vast possibility--of such spacious height and depth and breadth--a place where the awareness of death nurtures and enhances life itself. It was as if I were seeing a gorgeous internal landscape; one that I belonged to me and to everyone else who lived and who died. Veins become rivers; intestines become a labyrinth; kidneys and liver; muscles and sinews; all parts -- all infused with color and a glistening beauty I never knew existed or paid the least attention to. This inner landscape so perfectly combined and now, so exquisitely revealed.

The last part of the autopsy was the most difficult, I was told. If I wanted to leave before they opened the skull and removed her brain, they wouldn't think any less of me. Even some residents have a difficult time with this part. "No," I said. I wanted to stay.

I saw, for the first and probably only time, a human brain. "Would you like to hold it?" the forensic assistant asked me. Numbly, I said yes. Looking into the folds of the brain, into this incredible organ, silently, I began to weep. It resembled a cathedral window, folded and veined with delicate strands of blue against opaque tan. I realized at that moment, that this woman was more than just the sum of her parts. It's as if I could see her life--the fullness of her being--a woman who had lived and loved, who had eaten fried chicken the night before. She was someone who had listened to music, whose hands had touched children, whose palms may have lifted up in praise. And though her life was over, she was so much more than what I held in my hands. In fact, my hands could not contain all of her.

It was there, in that room, that whatever Presence I had called God returned. It was not the easy God of childhood--nor was it the intellectual God of seminary. Nor was it even the emotional God of suffering. It was a very human God -- not out there, but in here -- right here. It was the voice that, when asked "what is your name?" simply said "I am that I am." It was the void of nothing and the fullness of presence--in that moment--in that room--flooding the gates of despair with a deep appreciation for this life, and for that Presence, that walks with us. It is the God that lives and moves and has her being not only in our brain--not only in our hearts, but in all the inward parts--in every inward part.

We fear the unknown and for good reason. We don't know what the spring will bring--if the flowers will bloom or fail, if the projects we seed will take root, if the relationships we strive to sustain will flourish. Even in the midst of our uncertainty, there does abide an order, a rightness and a perfection underneath. I believe this is the meaning of faith--to realize that scarred or whole, we are fearfully and wonderfully formed; and that every body is a temple in which the Holy Spirit dwells and that even death cannot diminish this.

Why this God of my understanding chose to make her Presence known to me in the midst of that place, I have no idea. Why God transformed my ennui and sense of meaninglessness with a renewed sense of hope and deep appreciation for life, is still a mystery. What I found there, while staring down into the body cavity of a woman I did now know--and never would know--was a strange sort of happiness--clear through to the bone. What I discovered that day was the faith that comes not from indoctrination from the outside, but from the Spirit of God, bursting out from inside us.

The Psalmist knew something about that presence that followed me out of the autopsy room and into the rest of my life--"I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made."